

CLARENCE RAY: BLACK POLITICS AND GAMING IN LAS VEGAS, 1920S-1980S

Interviewee: Clarence Ray

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Interviewers: Helen M. Blue and Jamie Coughtry

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Description

The oral history of Clarence Ray is the third in a series intended to document the history of the black community in Las Vegas, of which Mr. Ray has been a member since the mid-1920s. The main source of employment for the relatively small black population during the 1920s and early 1930s was the railroad, but a number were also in business. Mr. Ray provides thumbnail sketches of many of the early black residents of downtown Las Vegas, formerly the Clark Townsite, and is particularly informative about “Mammy” Pinkston, Mary Nettles, the Stevens family, and the Ensley family.

Systematic racial discrimination against blacks developed in southern Nevada during the 1930s, and Mr. Ray provides some useful details on this development, and also describes some of the NAACP’s attempts since the early 1930s to end racial discrimination. Mr. Ray participated in efforts to secure the employment of black workers during the building of Hoover Dam, and was involved in the dramatic 1960 effort which ended public accommodations discrimination in the gaming industry, and worked to secure state civil rights legislation. He describes an early effort to maximize black voting power by organizing the Voters League in 1928; later he was president of the revived Voters League for two terms during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s.

This oral history provides new information about black participation in the gambling industry. After an early career as a baseball player, Mr. Ray became a professional gambler. While he worked in California and Mexico—and, briefly, in Elko and Reno—most of his career was spent in Las Vegas. He describes several early black-owned gambling houses in Las Vegas, including the first one, of which he was a co-owner. He also discusses the negative effects of civil rights advances on black-owned gambling (and other businesses) in southern Nevada, and the struggle to get major casinos to hire black dealers, culminating in the 1972 Consent Decree.

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An Oral History Conducted by Helen M. Blue and Jamie Coughtry

University of Nevada Oral History Program

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University of Nevada Oral History Program
Mail Stop 0324
Reno, Nevada 89557
unohp@unr.edu
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Publication Staff:
Director: R.T. King
Editor: Helen M. Blue
Senior Text Processor: Linda J. Sommer
Text Processors: Kay M. Stone, Verne W. Foster

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PREFACE TO THE DIGITAL EDITION

Established in 1964, the University of Nevada Oral History Program (UNOHP) explores the remembered past through rigorous oral history interviewing, creating a record for present and future researchers. The program's collection of primary source oral histories is an important body of information about significant events, people, places, and activities in twentieth and twenty-first century Nevada and the West.

The UNOHP wishes to make the information in its oral histories accessible to a broad range of patrons. To achieve this goal, its transcripts must speak with an intelligible voice. However, no type font contains symbols for physical gestures and vocal modulations which are integral parts of verbal communication. When human speech is represented in print, stripped of these signals, the result can be a morass of seemingly tangled syntax and incomplete sentences—totally verbatim transcripts sometimes verge on incoherence. Therefore, this transcript has been lightly edited.

While taking great pains not to alter meaning in any way, the editor may have removed false starts, redundancies, and the “uhs,” “ahs,” and other noises with which speech is often liberally sprinkled; compressed some passages which, in unaltered form, misrepresent the chronicler's meaning; and relocated some material to place information in its intended context. Laughter is represented with [laughter] at the end of a sentence in which it occurs, and ellipses are used to indicate that a statement has been interrupted or is incomplete...or that there is a pause for dramatic effect.

As with all of our oral histories, while we can vouch for the authenticity of the interviews in the UNOHP collection, we advise readers to keep in mind that these are remembered pasts, and we do not claim that the recollections are entirely free of error. We can state, however, that the transcripts accurately reflect the oral history recordings on which they were based. Accordingly, each transcript should be approached with the

same prudence that the intelligent reader exercises when consulting government records, newspaper accounts, diaries, and other sources of historical information. All statements made here constitute the remembrance or opinions of the individuals who were interviewed, and not the opinions of the UNOHP.

In order to standardize the design of all UNOHP transcripts for the online database, most have been reformatted, a process that was completed in 2012. This document may therefore differ in appearance and pagination from earlier printed versions. Rather than compile entirely new indexes for each volume, the UNOHP has made each transcript fully searchable electronically. If a previous version of this volume existed, its original index has been appended to this document for reference only. A link to the entire catalog can be found online at <http://oralhistory.unr.edu/>.

For more information on the UNOHP or any of its publications, please contact the University of Nevada Oral History Program at Mail Stop 0324, University of Nevada, Reno, NV, 89557-0324 or by calling 775/784-6932.

Alicia Barber
Director, UNOHP
July 2012

ORIGINAL PREFACE

Since 1965 the university of nevada Oral History Program (UNOHP) has produced over two hundred works similar to the one at hand. Following the precedent established by Allan Nevins at Columbia University in 1948 (and perpetuated since by academic programs such as ours throughout the English-speaking world) these manuscripts are called oral histories. Unfortunately, some confusion surrounds the meaning of the term. To the extent that these oral histories can be read, they are not oral, and while they are useful historical sources, they are not themselves history. Still, custom is a powerful force; historical and cultural records that originate in tape-recorded interviews are almost uniformly labeled oral histories, and our program follows that usage.

Among oral history programs, differences abound in the way information is collected, processed and presented. At one end of a spectrum are some that claim to find scholarly value in interviews which more closely resemble spontaneous encounters than they do organized efforts to collect information. For those programs, any preparation is too much. The

interviewer operates the recording equipment and serves as the immediate audience, but does not actively participate beyond encouraging the chronicler to keep talking. Serendipity is the principal determinant of the historical worth of information thus collected.

The University of Nevada's program strives to be considerably more rigorous in selecting chroniclers, and in preparing for and focussing interviews. When done by the UNOHP, these firsthand accounts are meant to serve the function of primary source documents, as valuable in the process of historiography as the written records with which historians customarily work. However, while the properly conducted oral history is a reliable source, verifying the accuracy of all of the statements made in the course of an interview would require more time and money than the UNOHP's operating budget permits. The program can vouch that the statements were made, and that the chronicler has approved the edited manuscript, but it does not assert that all are entirely free of error. Accordingly, our oral histories should be approached with the same

caution that the prudent reader exercises when consulting government records, newspaper accounts, diaries and other sources of historical information.

Each finished manuscript is the product of a collaboration—its structure influenced by the directed questioning of an informed, well-prepared interviewer, and its articulation refined through editing. While the words in this published oral history are essentially those of Mr. Ray, the text is not a *verbatim* transcription of the interview as it occurred. In producing a manuscript, it is the practice of the UNOHP to employ the language of the chronicler, but to edit for clarity and readability. By shifting text when necessary, by polishing syntax, and by deleting or subsuming the questions of the interviewer, a first-person narrative with chronological and topical order is created. Mr. Ray has reviewed the finished manuscript of his oral history and affirmed in writing that it is an accurate representation of his statements.

The UNOHP realizes that there will be some researchers who prefer to take their oral history straight, without the editing that was necessary to produce this text; they are directed to the tape recording. Copies of all or part of this work and the tapes from which it is derived are available from:

The University of Nevada
Oral History Program/324
University of Nevada, Reno 89557
775/784-6932

INTRODUCTION

Oral histories of Lubertha Johnson and Woodrow Wilson have helped fill in gaps in the history of black Nevadans in the southern part of the state. The narrative of Clarence Ray—who first visited Las Vegas in 1922, came to stay in 1925, and has lived there for most of the time since then—adds significant new information on this important topic.

The main source of employment for the relatively small black population during the 1920s and early 1930s was the railroad, but a number were also in business. Blacks lived and operated their businesses in downtown Las Vegas, formerly the Clark Townsite, not in the present Westside, formerly the McWilliams Townsite. Mr. Ray provides thumbnail sketches of many of the early residents, and is particularly informative about “Mammy” Pinkston, Mary Nettles, the Stevens family, and the Ensley family.

Systematic racial discrimination against blacks developed in southern Nevada during the 1930s, and Mr. Ray provides some useful details on this development, even if the reasons for the change from relatively

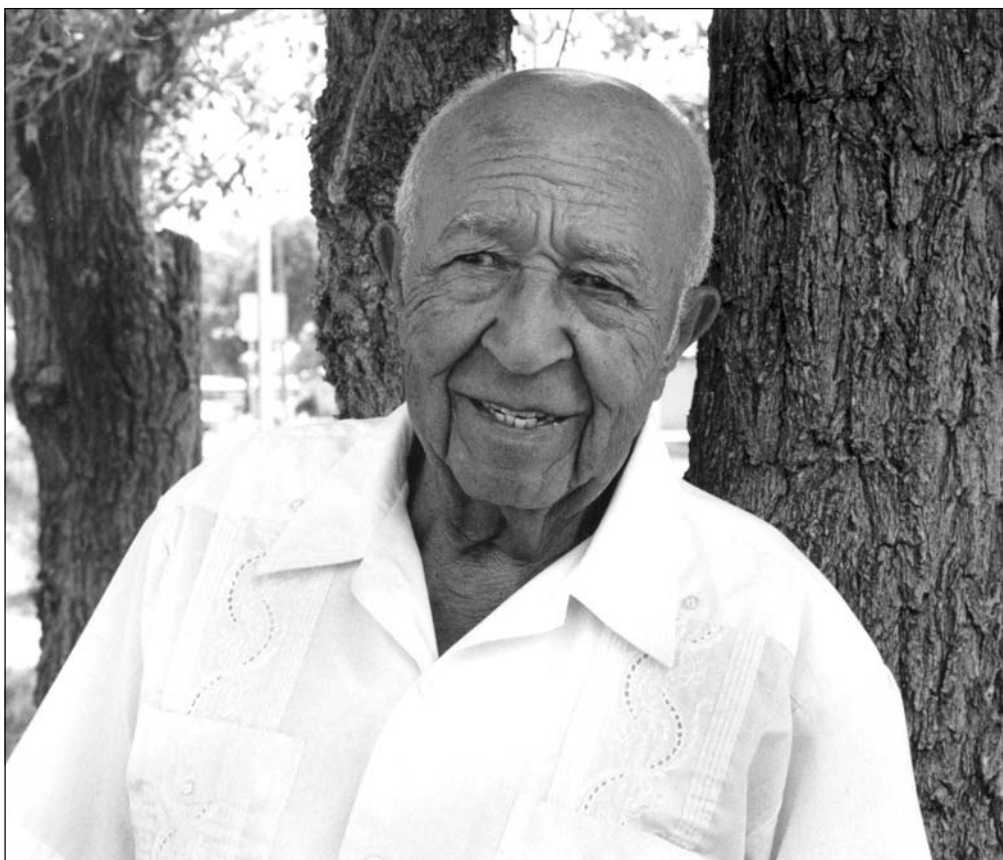
harmonious race relations remain obscure. Mr. Ray also helps us understand early efforts at organization within the black community. He explains the confusion over the date of establishment of the Las Vegas branch of the NAACP, and also describes some of this group’s attempts since the early 1930s to end racial discrimination. Mr. Ray participated in efforts to secure the employment of black workers during the building of Hoover Dam, and he also was involved in the dramatic 1960 effort which ended public accommodations discrimination in the gambling industry, and in efforts to secure state civil rights legislation. He describes an early effort to maximize black voting power by organizing the Voters League in 1928; later he was president of the revived Voters League for two terms during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s.

This oral history also provides new information about black participation in the gambling industry, the growth of which stimulated the development of Nevada’s largest metropolitan area. After an early career as a baseball player, Mr. Ray became

a professional gambler. While he worked in California and Mexico—and, briefly, in Elko and Reno—most of his career was spent in Las Vegas. In these pages he describes several early black-owned gambling houses, including the first one, of which he was a co-owner. He also describes the negative effects of civil rights advances on black-owned gambling (and other businesses) in southern Nevada, and the struggle to get major casinos to hire black dealers, culminating in the 1972 Consent Decree.

Although now in his nineties, Mr. Ray's memory remains clear and his judgments are crisply stated. His oral history adds significantly to our knowledge of an interesting person and of the black experience in Nevada's largest city. It is third in a series intended to document much of the history of the black community in Las Vegas. The first in the series was the 1988 *Lubertha Johnson* oral history, and second was *Woodrow Wilson*, published in 1989. For subsequent volumes to be published after 1991, readers should consult updates to the Oral History Program *Collection Catalog*.

Elmer R. Rusco
Professor Emeritus, Political Science
University of Nevada, Reno
December, 1991



CLARENCE RAY, 1991

(Photograph by Helen M. Blue)

FAMILY AND EARLY YEARS

I don't know very much about my paternal grandparents except that they were Creek Indians, but I knew my grandparents on my mother's side well. My mother's mother, whose first name was Fanny, was born a slave, but she didn't talk very much about her time as a slave. My mother's father's name was Henry Swinger. He was quite a talkative person. Grandfather Swinger was never a slave; he was a British subject who was born in the Barbados Islands and became a seaman when he was seventeen.

My grandfather went to sea, which was a common thing for a lot of the blacks down in that area to do. About twenty-five or thirty of them got on a ship that was going to Canada. They jumped ship when they got up in the Canadian waters, and then they came down into the United States to fight in the Civil War. (They had heard all about how there was going to be a civil war and that we were going to free the slaves!) My grandfather said they got down to Massachusetts, which was the first place they could join the National Guard. Right away they went and fought in

the Civil War. My grandfather fought in the war for two and a half years.

When the war was over, they were at a place called the Chickamauga battleground right out of Chattanooga, Tennessee. My grandmother, Fanny, was there. She was one of the ex-slaves who was there who had no place to go. She just kind of took up with the troops and followed my grandfather around. She didn't have food, so he would divide his food with her. When he was ready to leave, they asked, "What are you going to do, Fanny?"

She said, "I want to go with Henry."

They asked Henry, "Will you take her?"

He said, "Yes." She wasn't quite fourteen years old. Then came the time when he said, "But I don't know if I can take her or not."

A guy said, "Why not?"

He said, "I'm not an American citizen. I'm from the Barbados Islands."

The man said, "You fought all during the war?"

Henry said, "Yes."

He said, "How long?"

“Two and a half years,” he said.

The man said, “You’re a citizen. You can take her.”

After it was all agreed, my grandfather got papers saying that my grandmother could go with him kind of as a wife or a companion after the war. My grandmother was already pregnant by another slave when my grandfather took her as a wife. Her first daughter was born when she was fourteen. (She eventually became mother of seventeen more children, so my grandparents had eighteen children altogether. My mother, Inez Smith, was the first child that my grandmother and grandfather had together.)

My grandparents walked from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Muskogee, Oklahoma. My grandfather used to tell my cousin and me about that; he liked to talk to us. He said most of the walking they did was across Arkansas. He knew where he was going: he wanted to go to Indian Territory. Since he had been told that he was a citizen, he wanted to go write a claim on some land, which he did; when they got to Oklahoma, my grandfather got 160 acres for himself and 160 acres for his wife. As each of their children were born, he’d see to him getting land. My mother was born there in Oklahoma. My grandfather was commonly known in that part of the country as a freedman.

My grandmother, Fanny Swinger—I’ll never forget her. She was 104 when she died. She would always say, “You always go out to your other grandmother, as you like her better than you do me, because she’s an Indian.” But I didn’t. I liked one as well as the other one, but my mother’s mother, she just wasn’t like my father’s mother—she didn’t do nothing but clean up the house and the yard and everything else. [laughter]

My Indian grandmother’s name was Edie Ray. I don’t remember my grandfather’s

name, because we only called him Grandpa. [laughter] They lived right out of town on what they called a farm; they call them ranches now. There was a big pond where they watered the horses and the cows, and it had fish in it. And she’d go down on the stream with us and fish, and we’d clean the fish and fry them out, just like we was way out somewhere. We got a kick out of that. Beyond that, I don’t remember too much about either one of them.

Where our family grew up it was the Creek Nation. There were five tribes of Indians in Oklahoma called the Five Civilized Tribes.¹ In Oklahoma the Indians didn’t live on reservations like they do in most other places. Instead they claimed their lands and owned them. Our family was considered as Creek freedmen because they lived in Indian Territory.

Though they had quite a bit of land, my family didn’t farm. (But they were fortunate enough that some of the land had oil on it.) My grandfather Swinger would rent the land out to sharecroppers, who worked the land. He furnished the land and the seed and the animals, and the workers got a certain amount of whatever the land produced. As near as I can understand it, mostly everybody who worked got a certain amount of the profits.

I was very close to my grandfather. I’d ask questions and he didn’t mind answering. I wanted him to tell me about the war and about how he came over to the United States. He would tell me about slavery so I’d be sure to understand the difference between working as a slave and working for a salary. He said a great thing had happened to all of the blacks in America who had lived in the slave states. After emancipation, they would have to be paid and they were promised land and animals. But my grandfather also told us right away that the government didn’t live up to its promises: they didn’t give very many

blacks land, and very few of them got any help to raise crops. They went from one type of slavery into another—into what we now call economic slavery, I guess.

This grandfather of mine had a certain amount of education, and he talked all the time about segregation and black history. One man he admired a lot was Booker T. Washington. He was the founder of Tuskegee Institute, an all-black school in Alabama. He also told us who Frederick Douglass was.² My grandfather was the only real influence I had other than my mother. He died when I was twelve.

My mother, Inez Smith, was married to my father, Floyd Oscar Ray, in Oklahoma. (He was a Creek Indian from Oklahoma.) It seemed as though they were both kind of high-tempered. They had some kind of misunderstanding, and during a little scrape, she shot him. She got scared! This older half-sister of hers was married and lived in California, so my mother left Oklahoma and went there. Her half-sister's family had a farm and raised grain and cattle. (That was before cotton came to California.) My mother stayed in California until I was born, February 28, 1900, in Fresno. In fact, some of my family still lives there on that land. I was four or five years old before I went to Oklahoma at all.

My mother moved us around when I was young—California, Arizona, New Mexico. We lived in Phoenix a while, and then Yuma. We traveled by train; it was before the car days. (I remember when we bought our first car that we could travel in—this was about 1917.) Wherever we were, we usually lived in town, although most places we lived we did own a farm. As near as I ever came to living in the country was later in a place called Malaga, just four miles from Fresno. My mother would sometimes go as she wanted to and leave us

kids behind, because she got good at handling her own money.

When I was about ten or twelve years old, my mother was married to a man named McDaniels, and we moved to California. McDaniels was my first stepfather that I remember, and was the father of my brother, Jack McDaniels. He was a farmer as near as I can understand. He and my mother eventually separated in Arizona. After that, my mother married a fellow named Frank Smith. He was the father of my three sisters, so there were five of us. He was a Baptist preacher. Though he was a minister, my mother wasn't much of a churchgoer, so I didn't go to church. But we did read the Bible at home. All preachers moved around. Frank Smith moved around quite a bit until he settled down during his last twenty-five years and made his home in Fresno.

I was close to my stepfathers, especially to Frank Smith. We were very, very close. He lived eight or ten years after my mother died in the 1940s—she was in her eighties. Then he stayed on with us until he died. He and my mother are both buried in Fresno, California.

I think it was probably my mother who influenced me the most, because she seemed to be the boss of the family at all times. She was the one who insisted on us going to school, and she tried to tell us all the rights and wrongs that she knew about. She didn't have too much education herself, but she was kind of self-made.

My mother always tried to acquire land, so we lived well. I guess it was because of some of the teachings from her father that she always did this. She had farmland up around Fresno, which is part of the San Joaquin Valley. There was a lot of fruit, alfalfa and corn. It was not unusual for black families to own land in that part of California.

Education was *very* important in our family—it was then and it still is. Although my mother didn't have much education, she tried to see that the rest of us did. My mother learned to read after she was grown. She knew a little bit about reading, but to just sit down and take a book and read a story or read the newspaper... she learned that after we started going to school. I guess I was more of a teacher to her after I was in school than any of the rest of my family.

I started school in Oklahoma, but I later attended public school around Fresno. That was back in the days when they had a book that was just ahead of the first grade; they called it a primer. That was the first book I tried to read anything in. We had complete segregation in Oklahoma—all-black schools. The next school I went to was around Fresno. I also went to school in the Imperial Valley in El Centro. Then I went to seventh and eighth grade in Los Angeles. I finished high school in Fresno when I was eighteen. I graduated from Edison High School in 1918. (A lot of people think it was the first high school in Fresno, but it wasn't. Fresno Union High was the first one, and then there was Edison School. It was put there by a big electrical corporation in the central part of California.)

I never knew much segregation in California schools, because we all went to the same schools back then. The only thing I remember about segregation of blacks concerned a black schoolteacher in the 1920s in Imperial County. This black schoolteacher had moved from Arkansas. Instead of trying to get a job as a schoolteacher in California schools, he began to ask for an all-black school. He probably felt that the only way he could get a job teaching school was if there were a separate black school. Eventually, they carried it to the courts, and they said there would be no segregated schools in California.

As near as I can remember, the only trouble we had in school in Fresno was with the Mexicans. There was quite a number of Mexicans; California was *very* thickly populated with Mexicans when I was young—more Mexicans than anything else. There weren't enough blacks going to school to have any beef about it, but they *were* having some kind of trouble with the Mexicans. (I had quite a few Mexican friends in California. Part of my family speaks Spanish. I now have Mexican members of my family among the younger ones, because I've got some nephews and nieces who are married to Mexicans. Some of my older family members had Creek wives that they brought from Oklahoma, like my uncle, Bradley Swinger—my mother's brother—married a Creek woman.)

Fresno is where I first started reading newspapers that amounted to anything. Of course, we got papers from both San Francisco and Los Angeles. They'd be a day late, because everything traveled by train in those days. Though it was late, my people always took the paper. There were two black papers printed then: one in Philadelphia and one Chicago—the *Chicago Defender*. We read them all the time. Wherever we moved, we had them sent to us.

There was a big ranching outfit around Fresno called Miller and Lux. They were like cattle barons. They already owned a lot of the land, which they used for grazing purposes. When these cattle barons got ready to sell their cattle, they needed to fatten them up. The few people who had farms that they were really working just raised grain to sell to Miller and Lux. They'd raise oats, wheat, corn, and other stuff of that kind. They also bought all the hay you could produce, so people always made a good living.

The first place they planted cotton in California was in the Imperial Valley, right on the Mexican border in 1925. Then they put cotton over in another valley called the Palo Verde Valley. The main town over there now is Blythe, California. They had cotton there as far back as I can remember, but I didn't go down there until I was about eighteen or nineteen years old. When they put the cotton in, it seemed like it was going to be a big thing. They started buying up all those small places and the big farms up there owned a thousand acres of land that they would raise cotton on.

When I was eighteen, my family sent me to this all-black Methodist school called Western University. It was kind of an agricultural school in Kansas City, Kansas. I think the reason I got sent there was because my grandfather, Henry Swinger, was a Methodist—at least he used to *talk* about Methodists all the time. That's the *only* all-black school I have ever gone to. (It was founded by W. T. Bernard, and it's closed now. The school had quite a bit of land, and I think the state bought it and did something else with the land.) I didn't really want to study anything in particular. Of course, it was a kind of a trade school, and I took up automotive engineering. I guess I figured I was going to be a mechanic, but that didn't work out, and I only went one year. My excuse for quitting was because I didn't make the football team my second year, so I went home. I kind of lied to my mother and told her I was going to go back the next session. She finally told me if I wasn't going back to school, to tell her. So I did, and she told me, "Your room rent and board bill starts today." That's when I was nineteen years old.

I had been a good athlete when I was in school. They didn't have mixed professional teams then, but we had mixed teams in

school. All the schools up through Iowa and Illinois had mixed teams. Kids went to school together and played together, but after we got out and turned professional, we played in segregated teams. I played in the Negro League.

My first team was the Wichita ABCs in Wichita, Kansas. They changed their name from the ABCs to the Monrovia's after I was there two years. Then I tried out for the Kansas City Monarchs. That was the best-known black team in America at that time. I didn't make the team, but instead of going back to Wichita, I went to Spring Valley, Illinois, to play.

I came back to California every winter, because the baseball season was just during the summer. In California, we played in what they called the winter league. All the teams would be mixed. I played for Soaper's Giants in Los Angeles, which had whites, blacks, and Mexicans. (The man who organized that league was named Joe Soaper.) We had the best semi-pro team out here. The Soapers eventually got to be kind of a big thing, but not while I was with it. I played about four years, altogether. But you couldn't make any money at it, so I quit... I had nothing but gambling on my mind, anyway.

I met my wife, Rosie, while I was playing ball. Her maiden name was Dorsey. She was from Rockford, Illinois. Being a ball player on the all-Negro team, I was moving around and I met her in Mason City, Iowa. She was there visiting somebody. I got acquainted with her and she gave me her address and telephone number in Rockford. I was quite young—about twenty—and she must have been seventeen. Rosie and I were married in Rockford, Illinois. That's the only way I could get her away from there. I had to be married to her or people wouldn't let her leave. We left there and went to El Centro, California. We

were together off and on for nine years, but it wasn't continuously. I'd leave places and go back and get her. I thought I had a lifetime contract on her, I guess. [laughter] After we separated, she married Orion Stevens, who worked for the railroad in Las Vegas.

My mother had always talked about me being a professional man of some kind, because she felt that I had the makings for it. I always said that I didn't want to be a doctor, so she would talk about the law a little bit. I think what really kept me from being interested in school after I got to be about twenty years old was this: In Fresno, there were only two black professional men—one was a lawyer and one was a doctor. But they never seemed to have enough money to buy food for their wives and children. (Both of them had two children.) They didn't really get clients, because hardly anybody would go to them. Even the black families that lived there didn't go to them. This race issue would still come up among them. All of the blacks were from the South, and they'd say, "What does he know?"

At that time, my uncle, George Taylor, often fed these two black professional men. He wasn't much older than me. Uncle George had some gambling going in Fresno. He got me into gambling when I was a young man, and taught me all about it. He had a poolroom and he always had crap games and poker games in the back of it. I worked with him and he'd give me a percentage out of whatever I made on the games. So I told myself, "These men went to school until they were twenty-five or twenty-six years old, and they can't even make a living. Here I'm making a hundred dollars a week!" One hundred dollars a week was a lot of money in those days—that was more than the average person got in a month! And that's one of the reasons why I wasn't too interested in furthering my education; he's the cause of

me not continuing school! [laughter] But I've been very sorry every since—I live well, but I still have been sorry.

At my Uncle George's place, they played all the games—dominos, all kinds of cards, checkers. This uncle of mine was supposed to be one of the best checker players in the state of California, because he went to Pasadena and played in the tournaments and wound up second. People always said that he had learned out of a book, but he said nobody ever taught him. He just made up his own combinations and things and knew how to play. He won a lot of games—there wasn't too much money in checkers, but I've known him to win as much as two thousand dollars at one time.

I ran the crap game for my uncle. We'd shoot craps on the table. Back in those days when they were running crap games, if the crap shooter wanted to shoot two dollars, he had to put a nickel in, and the house took the nickels. That's what I would do: I'd take what we call the "take-off" now. My uncle would take the nickels and put them in a locked box. At the end of a shift, I had to count the money. If there was fifty dollars there, 25 percent of it was mine.

Uncle George first made a cheater out of me when I was gambling, because I was young, and nobody Since I was only eighteen, we figured nobody would pay too much attention to me. He would set me up in games to try to hustle people—sometimes it'd be a game that I'd like to play; sometimes it'd be a game he'd play. Both of us made money off it—enough to keep me from going to school, all right. I also played pool pretty good, but cards and dice was my game.

Uncle George never was involved in the Nevada gambling no more than just to come up where I later worked sometimes. He owned a little place in Fresno, and then he was in with one or two that I worked in up here. But he

was a silent partner; he never put his name on a license.

My uncle George Taylor was originally named George Swinger—he just changed his name! [laughter] He was my grandfather Swinger's youngest son. He got into trouble, so he just changed his name. My uncle grew up in California. My mother helped to raise him, and wherever she went, why, he would follow. (Of course, my uncle's dead and gone now; he died a few years ago.)

Besides working in my uncle's place, I also worked in Chinese gambling houses in San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and in Mexico. It was common for the Chinese to employ blacks, more so than anybody else. You hardly ever found any whites working at a Chinese gambling house. They hired a lot of blacks because they usually set up their operations in black neighborhoods—they couldn't get legally licensed to operate in white neighborhoods. But the Chinese were always willing to pay more shakedown than anybody else. So the authorities would look the other way.

In California there would be Chinese dealers, black dealers and Mexicans—of course, there were a lot of Mexicans in California. When I first went to work for the Chinese, I went to work in Mexico, over in Mexicali, right across the border from Calexico, California. I was living in El Centro, California, then. I was about nineteen years old. I just kind of followed the gambling from place to place. Where the gambling closed in one place, we'd all go to another place. I also worked in Tijuana; this was in the late 1920s and early 1930s when I was living in San Diego. They gave us a salary of twenty dollars a day, plus a small percentage of the take. Most people then were making twenty-five dollars a week! Since gambling was legal in Mexico,

working in the Chinese gambling houses was a good business for the Chinese as well as us workers. I worked in them off and on from my early twenties until about twenty-five years ago, when I decided to stay home all the time.

The Chinese had the same type of gambling as the white places, except for one game that they only played among themselves. It was called Pai-Yu or something; I never could understand it, so I never involved myself with it. I was paid by the day. You had to be able to work on all the games, because they always had two or three different types of games—keno, blackjack and poker. They had the numbers game, what we call keno here now. Back in those days, they called it Chinese lottery. When I was a boy, they were playing that.

I've always considered myself a professional gambler because I've always made my living in or around a gambling house. Gambling was illegal in California, but there was always some official who liked money. [laughter] That's the way it was. The people who had the gambling houses where I worked always had somebody to pay off, so I never had any trouble. But later, I did get arrested a few times in Los Angeles for what they called floating crap games. You'd go to jail and stay a half-hour or something like that, and then somebody would get you out. But I never had any trouble at that particular time, because I wasn't even old enough to be operating a gambling house. I just knew enough about it to always get a job.

BLACK LAS VEGAS, 1920S-1940S

I made my first trip to Las Vegas when I was living around Los Angeles in 1922. Nobody was making any money. There were three or four of us around there who were pretty good pool players, but it was all hanging around the pool halls and shooting craps, and nobody had any money. Ralph Simpson, Henry Wilson and myself were all pool hustlers [laughter], and one day a guy came down and asked would we be interested in working. All of us said, "Yes!" We thought maybe it was just one of those one-, two-, or three-day jobs.

He said, "You got to go to Las Vegas. All the work you want's up there."

I said, "What kind of pay? What are they paying up there?"

He said, "Oh, you'll make about five dollars a day," which was real good pay in 1922, because the money was getting tight again right after World War I. Being young and excited about maybe making two or three paydays at five dollars a day, we left for Las Vegas.

We came on the Union Pacific Railroad. But when we got here, we went over to the

railroad shop and found out there was a strike.³ The man who had told us about the jobs didn't tell us he was looking for strikebreakers! That's what he was doing, but he didn't tell us he was.

I said, "What time do we go to work?"

They said, "Seven o'clock tomorrow morning."

I said, "I'm going out and look at the town. I'll be back before dark."

They said, "You can't go out looking at the town."

I said, "Why not?" The first thing that came to my mind was that the town was so segregated that blacks couldn't go out.

He said, "You're a strikebreaker! If they catch you out there, they'll beat you up."

I said, "Oh, I didn't know that."

From some of the guys working around there, I found out there were only two buses a day running through here: one from Salt Lake to Los Angeles and one from Los Angeles to Salt Lake. The buses would get here at night. As soon as it got dark, I slipped out and caught a bus and went back to Los Angeles. I

left Ralph Simpson and Henry Wilson in Las Vegas, and they stayed on.

At the time we didn't know too much about strikes and things of that kind. I knew that I liked the idea of unions, because I felt the working man needed some protection. Without the union, the bosses tell you when to work, when to quit, and how much you get paid. I knew I wasn't going to try to protect these guys' non-union jobs. I was only twenty-two years old, but I did know that I liked the idea of the union. I had been reading the story about the coal miners' union. It was the only kind of union that was being supported. It was in 1919 when they had a big commotion about that. I was nineteen years old when Lewis headed the miners' union.⁴ The miners' union was the only worthwhile union at that time. Even the railroad companies didn't have a union. I knew quite a bit about that, because I read about it. I always knew that the working class of people didn't get a fair shake. That is what Lewis said.

I had gotten this idea about the working class earlier from my uncles. They never wanted to do any labor for others: they always worked for themselves, because they said they couldn't get the proper pay, otherwise. My uncles had their own little farms and things of that kind, and I had one who talked to me a lot. He was called the teaming contractor. He had his own teams, and he hauled, and when trucks came in he started buying them. At one time he got the trucks and worked for the garbage department in Fresno. He had to hire the people who worked, and the city paid him a certain amount. He would always try to get somebody he knew to work for him, so he got his own people. He said he'd be glad when the laborers got a union.

When I returned to Las Vegas the second time, I came on my own in 1925. Between

1922 and 1925 I had been in El Centro, California, where my mother had a grocery store. The story had broken about money being appropriated to build the dam.⁵ (They called it the Boulder Dam in those days, and some people still do.) I read a long story in a Washington paper about it, so I started coming back up here. In 1925 I just moved back up here to stay. I was going to stay at least until they started on the dam. (As it turned out, Las Vegas has been home since then, though I voted away from here one time in 1940 in Tulare, California.)

When I first returned, I thought I could probably get a lot of experience because I didn't intend to do anything but gamble. Las Vegas had always fascinated me because of the legalized gambling. They had what they called the mild form of legalized gambling and legalized prostitution in this town. This was before the wide-open gambling came. Slot machines were already here when I came in 1925; there were slots in all the places. The legalized gambling was going on, but it was just so small.

The first job I had was in a gambling house called the Miner's Club. It was owned by a Mexican fellow named Lopez down on First and Fremont Street. I ran a poker game, and back then you could make better than the average salary doing that. Each player had to pay so much per hour to play—at that particular time, it was sixty cents; they called it table rent. Players also had to buy their cards from the house. After supervising the poker game for a week or ten days, the guy found out I really knew what I was doing, and he gave me another job as an assistant shift boss. Then I could sell chips, and go from table to table and get the sixty cents. Because so many people didn't last the hour, we broke down the table rent—that way players paid twenty cents every twenty minutes. That was my job.

The next job I had was at a gambling house called the Exchange Club, which was owned by whites. Everybody called them the McCarthy brothers, but I didn't know one brother's name from the other. The Exchange Club was on First Street between Carson and Fremont.

I lived on Third Street in Las Vegas in a house owned by a woman named Mary Nettles; I rented a room from her. Mary Nettles was originally from Alabama, and she moved all of her family out here. She owned quite a bit of property and was wealthy. Most all of Second Street and all of Third Street was owned by blacks, and some black families also lived on First Street. Mrs. Nettles had a building she had built on the side of the house. It had eight rooms with kitchen facilities in the back of the house. Mrs. Nettles also owned a couple of houses on the alley. I don't know how she paid for them; I never did hear her say, but this was back in the bootleg days, and I've heard people say she used to make whiskey and sell it . . . but I don't know that for a fact. This downtown property still belongs to Mrs. Nettles's family. She never did sell it; she just let out long-term leases on it. (Unfortunately, very few Negroes who owned property held onto it long enough to realize the increases in land value which have taken place.)

All the people who rented from Mrs. Nettles were black. They worked in the railroad shops; there was really no other kind of work for anyone to do except for in the railroad shops. They worked as machinists, and electricians and everything, and some of the families are still here. I can't remember any poor blacks in Las Vegas back then, because if you didn't have a job, you had no incentive to stay, so you'd just move on. Everybody had some kind of a job. Some of the black children

that were born here left for California, Salt Lake City—bigger towns. But some stayed, too.

I remember when I first came to Las Vegas, there were a few black families who lived on A Street; they had two or three lots. Most of them lived over in the town when I first came. There were not many blacks on the Westside; they lived downtown, mostly. Blacks did not live on Block 16. Block 16 was just a place where all the houses of prostitution were. Blacks owned some of the property, but they rented to the people who ran the establishments. They never mixed up on Block 16; you might as well say it was segregated, and most of the girls who worked the prostitution were white. I can recall maybe one or two black girls going over there in a matter of the ten or fifteen years that I lived close to it. Once or twice you'd see one come and stay a little while and then leave.

Blacks owned property in Las Vegas. Most of our people worked in the railroad shops, and the railroad company owned a lot of the land. They would encourage the employees to buy, so almost everybody had their own properties. Since blacks could buy property anywhere, every one of these people I remember owned more than just one house.

I recall a lot of the black people who lived in Las Vegas in the 1920s. There were thirteen or fourteen black families—perhaps as many as one hundred individuals. Blacks were just like the rest of the people and had the same types of jobs, though there were never many black miners. Sam Nettles, Mary Nettles's husband, was a machinist in the railroad shop. Their son, Clarence Hodges, had a shoe-shine business combined with a newsstand on First Street, just off Fremont. There was another black family named Pullom. Ike [Isaac] Pullom was a machinist in the railroad shop. His wife was Nancy Pullom, and she was a housewife. They

had two sons. One was named Ike, and the other was named Ernest, but he was commonly known all over the state as Babe Pullom. Nobody ever called him anything but Babe.

There was another family, the Levi Irvine family. Levi was a machinist for the railroad, and his wife was a housewife; I don't remember her name. Henry Wilson—who I came to Las Vegas with in 1922—worked in the railroad shop. Then there was the A. B. Mitchell family. Everybody called him Pop. He was a carpenter, and I later worked for him. He homesteaded forty acres in Paradise Valley with a man named Wash, who started the Fresh Air Club. Pop Mitchell had a wife and a daughter. His wife was a nurse in the local hospital, and his daughter, Natalie, was the first black child of record born in this town, followed by Cecile Mason. (Natalie is still alive and now lives in Seattle, Washington.) Pop Mitchell's sister, whose last name was Logan, owned ten acres on Industrial Road behind the present Stardust Hotel, which was once the location of the Sweet ranch. She was eventually paid ten thousand dollars for her property. Cecile Mason and Juanita Stevens were probably the first black girls to graduate from high school in Las Vegas. Juanita Stevens was the mother of Juanita Barr and she lived at Second and Stewart. She once owned about ten houses, near where the bus station is now.

Then there was Robert Jones, who was also a machinist for the railroad. His wife was Coreen Jones; she was one of the few black women who had a job doing domestic work. They had two children, Ruth and Robert Jones. Both of them were raised here and finished high school and then moved away to Los Angeles. There also was a Negro man who ran the express office; he was from New Jersey.

There are other people I remember: Erne Stevens was kind of a handyman; he could do

everything. They were still burning wood at the railroad, and he'd cut wood because he had a saw. He had one son, Orion Stevens, who was called Buster. He's still around Las Vegas, but he's very sick now. Buster retired from the railroad after fifty years. He was what they called a hostler helper. A hostler moves the engines and cars around to get them ready for the people to use. Buster advanced from a hostler helper and became a hostler. He took four years out to go into the service and came back, but he had forty-some years' seniority with the railroad company. His two sisters, Susie and Juanita, are still here. Juanita is quite a historian. Sue lives on Elliott Street, and her sister lives with her, but they both own their own homes.

Ralph Simpson, one of the men I came to Las Vegas with in 1922, stayed here as a machinist in the railroad shop. (They use the term machinist, but they could be electricians or what-have-you.) Ralph Simpson married a woman named Georgia, who was a schoolteacher, and they had one daughter. She's still in Las Vegas and retired from the Motor Vehicles department last year. Ralph Simpson homesteaded in Paradise Valley along with Bill Jones, Henry Wilson, Zimmy Turner, and some others.

Then there was the Hoggard family. (David Hoggard remembers that a black woman who looked East Indian used to own the Bellevue Hotel between Ogden and Stewart on Second Street.) I always argued with the people who said that Mabel Hoggard was the first black teacher in Las Vegas. About twenty years ago I put up an argument about that, but I found that they were right and I was wrong! I thought that Georgia Simpson was the first black schoolteacher. We had a little black paper here called the *Las Vegas Voice*, and I put a story about Mrs. Simpson in the newspaper. It showed a picture of Georgia Simpson and me talking over a fence. I had a

chance to talk to her and she said, "Clarence, I *was* the first black teacher here, but I was working for the railroad company. Mrs. Hoggard was the first black teacher who was working for the Clark County school system." At that particular time there were a couple of railroad sections out there ten or fifteen miles from town. If they had as many as five or six children, they had to have a teacher, so that's how Georgia Simpson got to teaching. During her first full five years as a teacher, she was working for the railroad company, and Mrs. Hoggard was the first black teacher to work for the school system. So I had to write a retraction and apologize for my mistake.

There was a black man named Johnson, who was kind of a contractor. He could do a little of everything, and he took a contract to build houses. He could also lay brick. He lived here for a long time and owned a lot of property on First Street. He had two daughters and a grandson named Richard Courtney, who owned property at First and Stewart streets. Since we were the same age, Richard and I did a lot of things together. We played ball together, and we used to fish and hunt and swim around the Colorado River. We'd hunt all over the southern part of Nevada. We hunted birds, rabbits, and, of course, deer. There were quite a few deer; you could kill deer out around what they call Mount Charleston now. Then they made a reserve out of it, and nobody could kill the deer up there but the Indians. The Indians could go and get one deer without a license or anything. Richard and I usually hunted close to town. We used to ride up in the Moapa Valley, because there were all kinds of birds and game. There were quail and doves, because people raised grain up there. Richard Courtney was hot tempered; he was quick to fight. When we'd get into things, he would always be right. But Richard Courtney and

I were very good friends. He stayed in Las Vegas and worked for the railroad company until he died.

Mr. Washington, another black man, had been a farmer in Iowa. He had a pretty good sized family. He had a son named George and one named Howard. He also had two daughters, but I don't remember their names now. The daughters were both married to white men, and each one of them acquired some property around town. The two Washington boys worked in the railroad shop, and Mr. Washington had a place out in the country; it was small, and he had a truck garden. He died kind of early, just about the time I came here. Howard was the last of the Washington family that I can remember. He was a World War I veteran; he just died last year. They brought him back here from Detroit and buried him out where they had a plot.

Joe Lightfoot was another person I remember. He was black. There were three Lightfoot brothers: Art, George, and Joe. Joe and his wife were cooks, and they set up kitchens for the big mining operations out around Eldorado Canyon and Searchlight, which was a big gold mining center.⁶ Joe Lightfoot brought in black cooks to do the cooking and so forth. He'd go set up kitchens where they had big strikes. Sometimes Joe would have to leave one of his brothers to operate the kitchen until they brought in another cook. He made quite a living at it, and bought quite a bit of property around Las Vegas.

I recall "Mammy" Pinkston quite well because I used to live in one of her apartments. (Her real name was Ginny.) Ginny Pinkston was kind of a con woman. She had these big dinners and charged high prices, and the guys that was handling the money wanted her to cater the parties; they called her Mammy Pinkston. She didn't have too much to do with other blacks—I guess she just kind of isolated

herself. She was here when I first came here. I understand that the way she came to the state was that she was a maid in one of the houses of prostitution, and she knew quite a bit about operating one. (In fact, I heard that she later became an operator up around Ely or someplace.) She came to Las Vegas and opened a cafe, and that's what she was doing when I first came. Whites went to her cafe. She was married to an Englishman by the name of Wilshire; he was quite sociable. She never called him anything but Mr. Wilshire, so we all called him Mr. Wilshire. No one called *her* Mrs. Wilshire, though. Mr. Wilshire . . . I knew him! He was a real fine man. He'd just go around and take care of his apartments and collect the rent. They had gone to Utah to get married, and they came back here. Blacks and whites couldn't marry in this state at that particular time.⁷ When he passed away, he left all of his property to her. When he passed on, I guess he had people who were way over in England someplace, because nobody ever come to visit him, to my knowledge.

We had some people who came from Utah who were intermarried: for example, the Stevens family. Mrs. Stevens's first husband was white. (I don't know his name.) They had three sons. When he died, she married a black man, Erne Stevens. There were some mixed marriages and there were some who lived as common-law marriages on both sides: white women and black men; black women and white men.

There was a black barber in Las Vegas, but I can't think of his name. He was the only black barber in town. He'd take white customers or anybody who come along, but I don't remember seeing any blacks go to the white-operated barbershops. We only had one funeral home here, Palm Mortuary, and it was owned by Mrs. Parks. She was a white woman, but blacks used her funeral home, too.

Of course, when they later started building Boulder Dam, so *many* black people

came to Las Vegas. Orion Stevens's mother owned a lot of property downtown. She bought some property from Joe Lightfoot. She let people put up tents back there, and they started calling it Tent City, but nobody lived over there but blacks. This property that Mrs. Stevens owned was one-half the block going behind Stewart Street quite a way. (There were no more streets after Stewart Street, because the fairgrounds were there.) The other half of the block belonged to a white fellow named Frank Ryan. I think they got together and sold out at the same time.

I knew a lot of black men who worked on the dam. There was "Uncle" Jake Ensley and his son, Boysie Ensley. Jake came in 1931 from Muskogee, Oklahoma, right when they were building the dam. (All of the work on the dam was mining—digging through those rocks.) Jake had a cafe business on First Street. Later, he opened a club on First and Ogden. His son finally wound up with the gambling and rooming houses and all his other property. Boysie just passed away about ten years ago. Jake's been dead about twenty-five years.

Harvey Jones was a dam worker. He worked there until they completed the dam. He had quite a bit of property around town. He had two or three apartment houses—mostly rooming houses. He passed away about five years ago. He has a daughter named Anderson. His wife and son wound up with most of the Jones property when he died. Most all the guys who worked on the dam have now passed away.

Most of the Indians who stayed here in town lived in this little place they called the Indian village. It's still there. As you go to North Las Vegas, you cross the street where the big Indian smokeshop is on Paiute Drive—that's the entrance to the Indian village. It was created so they'd have some place to stay

in town, because you know how funny they are about staying together. They all like to stay together, sort of like the Mexicans and the blacks. When they'd come into town, they'd want to have some place to stay. So the government gave them that land, too. That's why they have a store of their own.

In the 1930s the Westside became the black part of town. Before then, it had quite a number of whites, Mexicans—about a fifth of the population was Mexican—and a very few blacks. It was called Old Town in the 1920s. Blacks moved to the Westside because they bought lots from the railroad company for nearly nothing. People started to talk about twenty-, thirty-, forty-thousand dollars for a lot, and some of them already had lots over here on the Westside. Some had two or three fifty-foot lots. There was a black family I remember at the Westside whose name was Russell. The mother and her two sons, Eli and Harrison, lived on A Street. They had property there, I guess, up until the last one of them died. I remember one of the Russell guys got in a little trouble around here. He went away, and he had his brother just sell the property then. I don't know what happened to them, but I know they all died out. The Gilberts were here, too. Chet Gilbert operated a store on Bonanza Road on the Westside.

People wanted to move to the Westside from the downtown area. When they first came over, it was just like a desert, and the streets hadn't been laid off. It was really just a small community that hadn't yet been developed. But between the 1930s and the 1940s, it changed quite a little bit, because as a small amount of the blacks worked on the dam, they bought homes and built homes.

The only black businesses we had on the Westside during the 1930s was a couple of cafes downtown, and one two-story hotel built by a lady who come out here from Pennsylvania.

One of the cafes was called Uncle Jake's Place; his name was Jake Ensley. Then there was another cafe owner, Mrs. Harris. She had a place right on Stewart Street, across the street from where the old post office is. There was another fellow, too, named Johnson, who had a cafe on First Street right across the street from what they called Block 16, where prostitution was legal. Then there were barber shops. There was one just off of Fremont Street on First Street. That shop was owned by a black man named Harry Garrett. The other barber shop was on Stewart Street. There was a card room that was owned by a black fellow named Eli Nicholson; they called him Big Nick. That was on First Street just off Fremont. See, all the gaming that they had in town was on Main Street for two blocks. It was right along in there—except the gaming that Bill Jones and I put up on Stewart Street across from the post office.

The only thing that's been in business a long time in this community is owned by the Hewes family. They just have the liquor store now, but they used to have a grocery store, too. They've been there for thirty years. The rest of these businesses just come and go.

Many people owned small lots here on the Westside that they weren't doing anything with. Although she never lived on this side of town, Mrs. Nettles had a house and lot over here, and she had been renting it for years. When blacks got to where they could sell their downtown property for a big profit, they sold it and came over here, but not because they were asked to move or anything like that. It was because as land prices went up downtown, many people couldn't afford to hang onto their property. In fact, many of them made a lot of money on properties which they had acquired for little or nothing. But Mrs. Nettles never did sell her downtown land. She kept it and rented it out. The Mitchells kept part

of their land; the Pulloms had several lots; Tom Harris and his family kept theirs; the Irvines kept theirs and rented it out. (Mr. Levi Irvine, I think, was the first black guy who drowned in Lake Mead—he was out fishing. In the early days he worked in the railroad shop. When Mr. Irvine died, Mrs. Irvine moved over here onto some property that they had.)

When blacks started selling their downtown properties, it was said that they were *asked* to move out. That's not true.⁸ A lot of the things that they said about Ernie Cragin was mostly street talk. I never heard him say all these bad things, and I knew him quite well. (When I first came to this town, I had gone to work over at the railroad shop for a little while, and Ernie Cragin was a bookkeeper over there at that particular time. There was a man by the name of William Pike—we called him Bill Pike—and Bill Pike liked Ernie Cragin, so he picked him up as a young man and took him in as a partner. Eventually they opened the El Portal theater and an insurance business, Cragin and Pike.) Though black property owners downtown were not really *forced* out, Jake Ensley also said that the police commissioner in the late 1930s told black businessmen that their license would not be renewed unless they moved to the Westside. Chet Gilbert's father may have been the commissioner involved.

I owned property both on the Westside and in what they now call East Las Vegas. I bought the property in East Las Vegas in 1931. People had been living there, and the property had a well on it and a house. The owner came to see me and said, "My stepson says that you might be able to buy this land that I want to sell. I'd like to sell it to a black man because my wife was black, and we were together clear up until she died. She's buried here in this town." (This man and his wife had come here from Kansas, and I knew his stepson because we had played ball together in Kansas and Oklahoma.)

I said, "Well, I'd like to have it." I had seen the property, because his stepson showed it to me when he was here visiting. He had it fixed up real nice—a little garden spot and fence around it and everything. He said he wanted to have at least five thousand dollars. I bought it, but I never did live on it; the guy who rented it raised chickens. I'd give him a part of whatever he could produce, and he had an acre that was under cultivation. I owned that property for probably eight years, but I continued to live in town in a house I rented from Joe Lightfoot. Joe had three or four houses right on Stewart Street just a block from the post office.

When I let the property go, I bought some other property over on West Washington Street on the Westside about 1934 or 1935. Nothing was here when I bought it, but people lived on the block. The Mendoza family lived on part of the block, and I bought what was left. There were just four 25-foot by 140-foot lots, and I bought them. That was on the original Las Vegas townsite.⁹ That's where I live now, and I've still got all of the lots. I have just the one house that I built in 1942. I had a carpenter build it. This has been my home, but I haven't continuously lived here. When I thought I was going into the army, I put it into my mother's name, because I wasn't married. My mother put a cousin in there, and he stayed until I came back in 1947. When I came back, I never did take it out of her name. When she died, my sister had it probated back to me. I have a yard and trees and what-have-you. I guess why I like it so well is that it faces three streets, because it's a short block. I have 100 feet on Washington, 140 feet on H, and 100 on Allen. I bought another property in 1942, but I never lived there. An investment was all it was. I sold it while I was away, about 1945. In fact, my mother sold it for me.

This side of town would have been better if people could have just made the investments

where they had their property—you know, built nicer homes, apartment houses, hotels. We did have a hotel in the 1960s that was built, but they let it go broke. It never really did get off the ground, because they never did no big gambling. Then the hotel was a little bit too far away; had it been two or three blocks closer downtown, where the white and black part of town met, it would have been a success. But our problems in this part of town . . . we made them happen ourselves. We just didn't reinvest our money over here; we'd do something else with it. That's still true now, because they're doing the same thing.

I lived away from Las Vegas from 1942 to 1947. When I left, we only had this one little gambling house, and there weren't many other black-owned businesses. I moved to the San Francisco area, and I stayed up there four years before I moved back. Before I left, I had already built a house on the Westside in 1942. (Many blacks had moved to the Westside in the 1930s and 1940s.)¹⁰

When I came back in 1947, there were four black-owned gambling houses operating on Jackson Street. That was the main business street among the blacks over here, and by that time the Westside had become known as the black community. One of those gambling houses was the Cotton Club. Another one was the Ebony Club, and there was the Chickadee. There was also the Brown Derby. So that made four gambling houses. By the time I got back in 1947, some of the streets had been laid on Westside. Some people say that the living conditions were so bad on the Westside, but that's not true.

When I first came here, they had never had a regular city baseball team, because they had the railroad team. (We were here four or five years and had nothing but the railroad teams.) If you worked in the railroad shop, you could play; if you didn't work, you could

still play! They called it a Union Pacific team. After about eight or ten years, they came up with a little city team, and eventually, there turned out to be white teams and black teams. Some of the Mexican kids who were raised and schooled around here were good athletes. They would just play with either team that they wanted to. I don't think we ever had an all-Mexican team, but I guess maybe the blacks segregated themselves. I don't recall what kind of a name we had, because we were just always in Las Vegas.¹¹

At one time there were two teams down here and they never did know which one was the best. Finally, the railroad company had what they called the inter-mountain championship from all the different railroad teams: Ogden, Salt Lake City, and all that. We split our team up, and all of us got on what was called the Union Pacific team from Las Vegas—whites, blacks and Mexicans. One time we won the inter-mountain championship, but we had a little beef about getting the trophy, because some of us didn't work for the railroad company. We didn't get the trophy that time, because they were supposed to be playing a railroad team, and we were just a mixed city team.

When I first come here, the schools were not segregated. But they came up with redistricting in the school system after I moved here to stay in 1925. But there never was a race issue to my knowledge in the schools. Everybody just went to school together.

The Westside School was the first school in Las Vegas, they tell me. I'm not sure about that, but I've been told by some people who are real knowledgeable about it. It's become kind of a museum now; it's no longer a school. It's on Washington Street.

POLITICS AND RACE RELATIONS

Back in the 1920s and early 1930s, blacks and whites in Las Vegas got along fine. They were just one big family. We had traveling bands come to town, and we would have a dance and everybody got together . . . we knew each other. Whites and blacks danced together and drank together, and we went to all the prizefights together. (There were some good fights here during the construction of the dam, but all the *big* fights that we ever had in this state were staged in Reno.) We went to everything together, and we would all sit together. There was a movie theater called the Majestic, where the Golden Nugget is now, and it was not segregated. Of course, there was only one grade school and one high school, so everyone went to school together, too. The high school was where the federal building is today. We never had any trouble until later.

The NAACP got popular out in the West in the 1920s. It had started in New York and worked its way out here. My family have been members of the NAACP ever since it started in 1910, and everywhere I went—

Kansas, Oklahoma, California—people were NAACP members. They'd talk about the NAACP and said we needed it because it was a champion for the black folks. In Las Vegas, we knew about the NAACP, so some of us got together—this was in 1928. There was Mary Nettles, who I roomed with, and two or three others. We put up \$350 to organize an NAACP chapter and gave the money to A. B. Mitchell. We kind of made him the president, but instead of him taking the money and sending it back to the national office in New York, he took the money and left town! He went to San Diego and didn't come back for a long time. By that time I had seen him, so I told everybody. I said, "I saw Mitchell down in San Diego." (I had gone down to Tijuana to the races; when I was there, I saw him.)

Mrs. Nettles said, "What'd he say about our money?"

I said, "He wanted to press it. He wanted to borrow fifty dollars from me!"

She said, "You can kiss that money good-bye. Let's have another meeting."

So we had another meeting with the same people . . . except for A. B. Mitchell. Arthur McCants, who was a barber, was there. He had been the president of a local NAACP chapter up in Wyoming. He had resigned and came down here, so I talked to him. I said, "Would you be willing to help organize this thing? I've been trying to organize it, but I don't really know what I'm doing."

He said, "Yes, I'll be glad to help. It's needed very badly." So we set it up and put the money together again: Mrs. Nettles and me again; Bill Jones (one of my partners who ran a little gambling venture with me); and a woman named Zimmy Turner. It took the four of us to make the money up. At that time, it had to be four-hundred-and-some dollars to get the charter. Arthur McCants said, "Nobody's going to run off with this, because we're going to set this up right! We're going to send the bank draft back to the national." We sent it right away, and in less than a month, we had a charter. Arthur McCants was our first NAACP president of record.

Though we founded our chapter of the NAACP in 1928, we didn't have anything or any case that *tested* us until they started working on the Boulder Dam in the early 1930s. Four thousand people were hired before they ever started to work on the dam. But they wouldn't hire any Negroes; they'd always say, "We're filled up."¹² So Arthur McCants said, "This is what we are going to do: I'm going to have the NAACP national troubleshooter come out here."

I said, "Who is the troubleshooter?" Arthur McCants told me William Pickens, and it kind of surprised me. (Mr. Pickens was the field secretary of the NAACP.)

He said, "Do you know him?"

I said, "Yes, he was the dean of men when I went to school back at Western University.

He was the assistant football coach. We were very friendly."

Arthur said, "I'm going to come over to your house, and we are going to set up a time to call him and talk to him." (Just about two or three Negroes in town had telephones, and I was one of them.) Arthur McCants called him and explained, "They are already working on the Boulder Dam. They are working *thousands* of whites and no Negroes! I understand that's the government's money that they're building it with, and I'd like for you to look into this and see what's wrong." Then he said, "I have a man here who thinks he knows you and wants to talk to you."

When I started talking to Mr. Pickens, he just said, "Clarence Ray . . ." He just couldn't place me.

I said, "Were you an assistant football coach?" Then I remembered the coach's name at that time.

He said, "Yes, what did they call you?"

I said, "Most all the guys called me Chi-chi." (That nickname had followed me from Oklahoma.)

He said, "Oh, hell, yes, I remember you." He said, "Explain everything that Mr. McCants was trying to explain." So I told him over again. He said, "All right, I'll be there. I was going home, but I'll be there and I'll find out all about it. I'm going to leave tomorrow. It'll take me three days to get there." (They had to travel by train then.) He told me to meet him at the station.

I said, "OK. We'll be there." There were five of us who knew Mr. Pickens was coming to Las Vegas, and we just looked forward to the time when he would arrive. But when we got up there to meet the train from Salt Lake City, the mayor of Las Vegas, Ernie Cragin, and four city commissioners were also there. They almost took Mr. Pickens away from me. Of the five of us who knew

about Mr. Pickens coming to Las Vegas, I didn't tell anyone; McCants didn't tell; so it was left to three people. If I was going to think that maybe somebody told the mayor and commissioners, it might have been Jimmy Turner. Jimmy was always looking for the easy dollar. She might have said, "I can give you some information if there's anything in it for me." That's how I figured it. I might be wrong, but I always accused her of doing it. Anyway, it worked out, so it didn't matter all that much.

After he arrived, Mr. Pickens made a speech in the Majestic Theater building. By that time, it was kind of vacant; it wasn't used too often. They just used it for different events—school plays and things of that sort. There were some solid citizens who attended the speech. One of them was O. K. Adcock. He and C. C. Ronnow had a store in Las Vegas. Old man Adcock was talking to Bill Jones, who was a black man. (You couldn't tell Bill Jones from a white man, but he was black.) Adcock said to him, "Well, let's go in here and see what that NAACP nigger's got to say." Mr. Adcock was the kind of person we all looked up to; we all liked him. I guess he didn't mean all that much by what he said—it was just a common expression like we used among ourselves a lot. But Bill came and told me what Adcock said.

Pickens talked for an hour. You could hear anything in that building because it was so quiet. It was full of people, too. Mr. Pickens said, "I was going to go back to New York to see my family, but I won't. Instead, I'm going directly from here to Washington, D.C. I want to see *how* they can be employing four thousand people and not *one* black. This is taxpayer money that you're spending, and I want to find out for sure all about it!" This guy Mr. Pickens was quite a talker. After he finished his talk, I couldn't keep what I had

heard from Bill Jones to myself. So I eased up beside old man Adcock and said, "Mr. Adcock, what did you think of the NAACP nigger?"

He said, "Oh, Ray, I didn't mean any harm by that." (Everybody called me Ray.) He said, "I didn't mean any harm. I knew Bill was standing there, but we just say things like that. We intend no harm by it." I guess he didn't, but I don't know . . .

From then on, we just waited to see what the results of Mr. Pickens's efforts would be. Within ten days, they opened up an employment office on Fremont Street with a sign: "Dam workers wanted. None but Negroes need apply." That's what the NAACP did for this town. (But now we've got a lot of blacks who are completely against the NAACP, like the Black Muslims. Most of them say the NAACP didn't do enough. I'm not against the Muslims, but they do too much in some directions for me.)

We looked for new NAACP members in Las Vegas, and we'd tell people in town what kind of organization the NAACP was. My selling point was to mention the Scottsboro Boys case.¹³ The NAACP had some Jewish lawyers from New York. These lawyers put up the money for the NAACP to defend the nine youths. They went to Alabama to fight this thing, but they couldn't get any black lawyers to go with them. The Scottsboro boys got life terms in prison, and the NAACP lawyers kept subpoenaing the girls. Finally one of the girls said, "We told a lie. The boys were on the train, but they got on one of the boxcars, and we got in the other." This story was my selling point for the NAACP. Many blacks had never heard of that case, because some of them didn't read all that much, and news traveled kind of slow in those days. But I didn't have any trouble getting anybody to join; almost every black in town was a member of NAACP.

We didn't have many white members in the early days, though. I would say about the first time that we ever talked about any white people wanting to join, it was ten or twelve years after Boulder Dam got started. Then we started to appeal to whites, and we got quite a number of white members. Hank Greenspun was one; he was a life member.¹⁴ A city and county commissioner joined, but I can't remember his name.

There's no limit on the number of terms for which the NAACP president can be elected. We just elect him as long as he's electable, I guess. The most memorable president that I think ought to be mentioned is Arthur McCants. He was the first NAACP president; he was the one that saw to us getting some blacks to work on the dam. Then, during the time when we got the Civil Rights Bill, Dr. James McMillan was the president. After that, Woodrow Wilson was president for a time. And Charles Kellar was president one time. And this one man we got now, Reverend Jesse Scott, he's been president for three or four terms. You serve two-year terms. None of these people stand out as being really good community leaders. We never really had community leaders. Instead, the people kind of looked to the NAACP and the Voters League for leadership, because the majority of the blacks here are uneducated, and they kind of look to these groups.

The NAACP enabled blacks to work on the dam. After the blacks started working, nobody wanted to get fired because the pay was so good. Four dollars a day was the *cheapest* pay for common labor—fifty cents an hour. The other laborers got up to as high as ten dollars a day, which was a lot of money. This was just at the beginning of the Depression. They had to have hard-rock miners, because they had to dig in that

rock wall along the Colorado River, so they brought in hard-rock miners from Montana, where they were digging gold. And they had to have people who knew about water control, so they brought people that had been building the dams and things up and down the Mississippi River and all those places. They all come from the South, and they kind of brought their prejudices with them. The blacks were just as much the cause of it as the whites. The blacks wanted to be separate from the whites, and whites had been used to it, and they wanted to be separated from them, too.

When they finally started hiring blacks on the dam, the most blacks they hired was forty.¹⁵ It was well-known that the construction of the dam was the largest job anywhere in the world—it was a forty-million dollar job at that particular time. None of them lived in Boulder City. The blacks that worked on the dam would go out there from Las Vegas—twenty-seven miles. They just didn't have any place to stay out there. At Boulder City they pitched tents and things. The people that lived in Boulder City were just people who worked for Six Companies, Inc.,¹⁶ that contracted to build the dam. They had just come off another job, and they'd brought all their bosses and technicians and everything. Then when they finished this dam, they went up and built the Grand Coulee Dam in Washington. After the dam was finished, a lot of people drifted away from here; a lot of them did. And then we had a lull until all of a sudden they come in and started building the magnesium plant. And then the black population came, and they stayed and worked and just found other things to do as the community grew, see.

Frank Ryan was a coroner in Las Vegas during the dam days, and I lived next door to him. I often thought about his job, because one

time when I was out at the dam, somebody asked a worker how many high scalers had lost their lives. The worker said, "Not a one." But since I lived next door to the coroner, I knew better! Every time a guy would fall on the Nevada side, Frank Ryan had to go out there. If someone fell on the Arizona side, the coroner from Kingman, Arizona, had to come. I thought about what a lie that was, that they said no one had died!¹⁷

People who worked on the dam lived in a couple of areas. There was a place near Las Vegas they called Oklahoma City that was across the road from the old Railroad Pass.¹⁸ A lot of people who had come from Oklahoma to work on the dam lived there. A lot of whites who worked on the dam stayed there. About a year after the construction on the dam began, Boulder City got going. That was a government reservation, so you couldn't set up alcoholic drinks and you couldn't have gambling. For some time nobody lived out there. I don't think at any time there were more than forty or fifty blacks working out there. They all rode the bus, and eventually they built up car pools. There were a lot of seven-passenger cars then. They could get eight people in, including the driver.

When they were building the dam, the word "segregation" became popular. Before then we never had any trouble—*no* problems. But after the dam, things changed. I guess that's why Ernie Cragin and Bill Pike decided to segregate the El Portal Theater. That's the first place where they said, "You sit over here." That's the first I knew anything about it, because I used to go to the show at the Majestic all the time, and we sat all over, and it was owned by the same people.

The first time anybody ever said anything about my playing in the games in white establishments was the guy in charge at the

Boulder Club. This was about 1931. I'd go down there sometimes in the afternoon, and I'd sit around and play poker. I had a lot of patience. I'd sit and fool around—maybe I'd win twenty-five, thirty, sometimes fifty dollars. This particular day, I'd won a hundred dollars, a significant sum in those days. A white man in the club conspicuously asked the manager, "What nationality is that man?" The next day, the manager came up to me and said, "Ray, I want to talk to you."

I said, "All right. I know what you want to say."

He said, "No, I don't know how to say it."

I said, "Those guys over there asked you if I'm a Negro, didn't they?"

He said, "Yes."

I said, "If we have this race issue come around here, it's going to cause you a lot of trouble. I'm not coming back."

He said, "I'm not barring you. I wouldn't do it."

I said, "I didn't say you would. I wouldn't let you break up my game, and I'm not going to break up yours. You know, I've got to last, too." After that, I would go in and have a drink, but I would never play anymore.

As far as the race issue in jobs is concerned I am kind of of the opinion that things weren't so bad. Whites didn't want . . . how would I go about saying it? They didn't want to refuse us blacks only on account of being black, but there were good jobs that they wanted to keep for their friends and their relatives. But I'm not saying this *hasn't* been an issue. One time I run into it up in Elko, Nevada. This was sometime between 1936 and 1940. They used to have a big roundup up there, see. They'd round up range cattle and there'd be a bunch of cowboys—two or three hundred of them—and they wanted to shoot craps among themselves. These two brothers here in town,

Sam and Dave Stern, asked me would I go up with them, because they wanted to put down what we call a combination crap game. You'd put the lay-out on the table, just like they got now, but if somebody wanted to bet with others, they could bet. That's called a fading crap game. Like you'd say, "I want to shoot five dollars," and you wanted to fade the five dollars; you want to bet he didn't pass, and I'm betting they do pass. So they had to get somebody that *knew* about that; all the white dealers didn't know anything about the crap game, because this is a crap game like the ones we had among ourselves, among the blacks. Anyway, I went up there and the time come to open up, and they said, "Is that fellow with you?"

And Sam and Dave said, "Yes."

They said, "Well, we don't want any blacks to work in here or gamble."

Sam said, "Well, I'm sorry. We come up here on that account."

Then he said to the fellow, "Put the money back in the car."

The guy says, "What do you mean?"

He said, "Well, Clarence is my manager; he manages my games for me, so that's why I brought him along. If he can't manage, I can't leave my money up here with somebody I don't know a thing about."

So then they said, "Well, wait a minute, let's talk this over. We didn't understand it that way, you see, but I see two or three of these cowboys seem to *know* Clarence."

They said, "Yes, they worked with him, you know, at different places."

So they left me up there, and I was up there about ten days. (It'd only take about ten days to get one of those roundups straightened out and get the cattle shipped and branded.) That was the beginning of blacks gambling at the Stockman Hotel in Elko.

I went up to Elko five or six years later, and went to the Stockman just to see if they guys remembered me, and they did. There were a couple of black kids that was raised around there, and by the time I went back, they were working: one was working on Twenty-one; the other was working the crap game. So I guess I just broke the color line up there.

There was only one place in Las Vegas where we couldn't eat or sleep, and that was the Sal Sagev Hotel. Abe Miller owned it, and I hated him! I had an auto-laundry [car wash] in Las Vegas. In those days I used chewing tobacco all the time because I couldn't smoke my cigars around the gasoline. Sometimes I bought my chewing tobacco at the Sal Sagev. There was a black fellow named Sam who helped me around cleaning the cars. One day I said, "Go over to the hotel and get me some chewing tobacco." So he went over there. Miller himself was in there, and he wouldn't sell it to him.

He said, "What's wrong? What have I done wrong?"

Miller said, "Nothing. See, I just don't serve niggers." The word "black" wasn't so popular then; "nigger" was more commonly used, and it was the word Abe Miller used. Sam came back and told me that Miller wouldn't sell him the tobacco. I asked why, and Sam said, "He said he doesn't serve niggers."

I said, "Well, hell, I've been going there all the time! Finish this, and I'll go over and see about it." So I went over and asked Mr. Miller. I said, "I sent a fellow to get me some tobacco, and you said you didn't serve niggers."

He said, "That's right."

I said, "I've been buying the stuff in here all the time."

He said, "I didn't know you were a nigger. I thought you were a Mexican. I see you talking with those Mexicans and Indians all the time."

I said, "Well, I'm not, and I don't want to spend my money with anybody who doesn't want it. You won't be bothered with me anymore!"

I had the only car wash in town, which I leased from Jim Cashman, Sr. That's the old man—the dad; he's dead now.¹⁹ A couple of days later Mr. Miller brought his car to my car wash and drove it up on the driveway. He said, "I want to get the car washed and waxed."

I said, "You're in the wrong place."

He said, "Why?"

I said, "Well, now, you wouldn't sell me any chewing tobacco; I'm not going to wash your car, so get it out of my driveway!"

The story goes that the reason why Abe Miller wouldn't serve blacks was because his wife ran off with the depot porter, who was black. And that's what he had against the black race. But that's just a story.

During this time, blacks didn't go downtown, and quite a number of whites didn't come over here. I've heard people call Las Vegas the "Mississippi of the West." I think that came from the black entertainers, because people in the big hotels would hire all the black entertainers they could get, but they wouldn't let them stay in there. That started them coming over to the Westside to stay. (Mrs. Shaw took care of a lot of people who stayed here. And then there was a lady by the name of Simpson, who built a big house that had eight or ten rooms that she rented.)

Along with putting blacks on the job at Boulder Dam, the NAACP was later instrumental in the desegregation of the Strip. This was in the early 1960s when Grant Sawyer

was governor. The heavyweight championship fight between Floyd Patterson and Sonny Liston had been scheduled—Patterson was the champion at that time. The hotel owners had put up quite a bit of money to get those two in the ring together—you're talking about eight or ten million dollars, which was a lot of money in those days.

During this time in 1960, we got groups together to let white hotel owners know we weren't very happy about them catering to all races of people except to American blacks. Everybody from all over the world could come and go, but we were segregated! We had the news media—including the black newspapers—and we had cars and banners and everything. We had all met at my house and we were ready to go march on the Strip. We told the hotel-casino owners that we were going to have all the blacks we could get together to be out there with the news media. But the hotels that knew about our plans thought we were kidding. They said, "Oh, they're not going to do it."²⁰

We said, "We'd like that in writing, and we would like for it to be said before the news media." During this time, I think Grant Sawyer was back in New York. We kept him abreast of everything, because he was the champion for us, in that he went head over heels getting himself in trouble to desegregate the whole state. He said he wanted to desegregate while he was governor of the state, and he did! Governor Sawyer asked us not to march; he said to wait until he could get back and then we'd figure out what to do. So in the middle of the afternoon, we called our guys off. It was in the middle of the afternoon before the hotel owners who had put up this money for the fight got together and said, "We'll take down the bars; you can come and go as you please."

Some people say that what stopped the march was some meeting between Dr. James McMillan, Oran Gragson and Reed Whipple, who was a VP of the First National Bank and a city commissioner. (The meeting was supposedly right before the march on the Strip was supposed to happen.) But I think that's mostly street talk, because if there had been any secret meeting, I'd have been *in* on it; I would have known about it at that particular time, because I had my nose in *everything* in them days. And I was better known than McMillan or West or anybody else, because I'd been dabbling around with politics since 1928 in this state—ten or twelve years before they even come here. Besides, Gragson and Whipple denied that this meeting ever took place. So I don't think any of this is true. (The only time anyone ever met with Reed Whipple was when James McMillan, Charlie Kellar and Bob Bailey²¹ went to him with some kind of proposal for a bank over here on the Westside. I wasn't in on the meeting; I don't know what was said. But the bank never worked out. I knew the man that owned the lot where they were supposed to build it. He's dead now.) Reed Whipple was a fine man; he was a Mormon bishop, and he'd tell the truth whether it would help or hurt him. He's gone on, but I thought he was one fine man.

A lot of rumors that went around were street talk. People said these things because there was a little turmoil in the community about Bob Bailey and Dr. McMillan. At one time there was some money that was supposed to be put out there for housing for senior citizens through the NAACP—the NAACP national office advanced the money. It was supposed to be on West Owens along about J Street, somewhere in there, but Bailey and McMillan put it in North Las Vegas, instead, so that was the big deal: they used the money to build that Arthur McCants

housing complex there. That caused some hard feelings, because people needed the housing down here, too. This was about eight or ten years ago. (Bob Bailey had some political jobs around here. He's a Republican; he's got a presidential job back in Washington, D.C., someplace now. His wife is named Anna, and they used to own a bar over on this side of town, but he moved out. He was an ex-entertainer, who used to sing in the big bands and things. He gained more popularity after he got to be the road manager for Pearl Bailey.)

Relations between the blacks in this town and whites could probably improve more, but I think they've improved greatly since our Civil Rights Bill in 1964. We started on it in 1951, and we didn't get a civil rights bill on the statute books of the state until 1964.²² In 1953, George Rudiak had introduced a civil rights bill in Nevada. (He was a member of the Nevada State Assembly from 1953 to 1955.) Andy Bruner had given some money to help with the lobbying expenses. Not only was Carson City a long way from Las Vegas, but there was no place in between that would serve blacks. Lobbyists from here had to take box lunches and drive nonstop to Carson City. Unfortunately, Mr. Rudiak was not re-elected after introducing his bill.

Getting a civil rights bill passed in this state was hard, because we never had a Jim Crow law against the Negroes in this state anywhere. There wasn't one! They never would give us a civil rights bill, because they'd say, "You don't have a Jim Crow law." And when we finally found that there *was* a Jim Crow law (that was in 1960), it was against the *Chinese*, and that dated back to 1907. Back in them days all the towns had houses of prostitution, and the Chinese coolies who were building the railroad went into the

houses of prostitution. There was some kind of misunderstanding, and a Chinese killed one of the girls. And that's when this Jim Crow law was put on the statute books. *That's* what we had to find before we could get a civil rights bill!

After we got the Civil Rights Bill, we had to get the bosses to agree that they would *hire* blacks. To show that they would hire blacks, a couple of places here hired black women that you couldn't tell from white. That's when we kind of got a little bit teed off. So the guy come and told me: he said, "Well, I got a black woman."

I said, "Yes, but don't nobody know it. When we talk about black, we're talking about somebody black or dark brown or *something*, so they know damn well that they're not white!"

He said, "Well, maybe we ought to get together and talk."

I said, "We've already talked. *You* guys better get together and talk." We knew what we were doing. But no one really hired blacks until the Consent Decree was signed six years later.²³

When things were heating up nationwide between the races in the 1960s, Las Vegas had its own little troubles, too. There was an uprising that started on West Owens and H Street, kind of where the Golden West shopping center was. (I think they might call that place something else now.) It was never what you would call a race riot—it was a little riot between two factions among the blacks. David Hoggard's name was involved in it. He was in charge of the Economic Opportunity Board at that time, and the people said that he was giving jobs to people who weren't entitled to them. I don't know how true that is.²⁴ During this little riot they had some rock-throwing and what-have-you. The two

factions got to arguing about these jobs, and they spilled off to right on this corner. They did stop a few cars—this was kind of a thoroughfare, you know—so that's how white people got involved in it. The people stopped the cars and meddled with them a little bit. Nobody was hurt and there was no fight or nothing like that, but the mayor got a plane and flew over and told them they were going to send troops over with machine guns. (We had a little branch of the state militia stationed here at that particular time.) They told them if they didn't go home, they were going to send the militia over. So inside of four or five hours it was all over. That's the nearest thing to a riot, and you couldn't call it a *race* riot. It was just a little riot among this couple of factions is all.

You might hear people speak about this Consent Decree that was signed. At that time, the NAACP had a president who was an attorney: Charles Kellar. Mr. Kellar had authored a Consent Decree that the hotels signed saying they would employ blacks. (Charlie Kellar had a bad reputation, and he had trouble passing the bar when he first came to northern Nevada from New York. But we always figured it was a color proposition up there. So to show good faith, two other black lawyers went up and passed. Both of them passed the bar the first time, and Kellar was twice as smart as both of them.) After Charlie Kellar drew the Consent Decree up—it took him two days—we had it notarized. Then the hotel owners were forced to hire blacks. Of course, we could have gotten a special meeting of the legislature, but they signed it. That Consent Decree has helped us *more* than the Civil Rights Bill, because the Civil Rights Bill meant that because you could *spend* your money, but you couldn't *make* any out there.

One problem with the Consent Decree was that in twenty years, everyone was

considered a minority but the American white man! So when everyone talks about minorities, I always say who *is* a minority? If we have to say *blacks* or *American blacks* or *American Negroes*—whatever word we want to use But to say *minority* . . . in less time than two years, everybody was a minority in this country except the American white man! And the white woman is a minority now. So that's why I say that word minority could just be erased, as far as I'm concerned. I like the term *African-American* all right, if we just got to use it. They wanted it because everybody says *Mexican-American*, *German-American* or whatever, so the term *African-American* is not distasteful to me. On all the applications and everything I ever filled out, when it asked for race or nationality, I just put *American*. And I've had people who say, "Well, why did you put that down?"

I said, "Well, I am! I was born in the United States. My grandfather on one side, they found him here when the Mayflower landed, because my grandfather and grandmother were Creek Indians." So I'm mixed up just like everybody you see that's not real dark—got mixed up with some other race of people. I don't mind being called something to some race, as long as it's not meant to insult me.

Charlie Kellar kind of brought the hotels together and wanted to know if they'd be willing to contribute money for the upkeep of the NAACP. Two or three of them said yes, but some of them didn't quite understand why they would have to do that. Charlie Kellar was a man of a few million words, but he had an explanation, and it worked! Now we don't have any local man we feel might be able to do what he was able to do.

One of the ways the NAACP used the hotel fund was they paid the Reverend Jesse Scott to be a fund raiser. Jesse Scott originally

came west from New York. In Los Angeles there were two chapters of the NAACP, but they both had gone defunct, and the national pulled their charters. The membership of the two chapters down there started writing to the national NAACP in New York, so the national sent the Reverend Jesse Scott out there to set them back up. That's how we got acquainted with him. Charlie Kellar later brought him to this town because he figured Scott might be a fund raiser for NAACP in Las Vegas. The hotels were giving seventy-five thousand dollars a year to NAACP, and Scott was paid out of this money. But they only agreed to do this for two years or three years, I think.²⁵

I was a member of NAACP when Scott came here. Scott came and did a pretty fair job. But when the fund from the hotels ran out, then Scott didn't have a job. But he stayed in town and worked at a few different things. He had a state job at one time on the Equal Rights Commission; he was the chairman. At one time he was going around to different churches and talking. I think in the last six or eight months he has set up a church. He has a meeting over in what they call Heritage Hall. He has a sermon over there every Sunday that they say is short and to the point. (I have never been to his church because I'm not much of a churchgoer.) Reverend Scott is now president of the NAACP, which is a non-paying job. I don't know why Reverend Scott made up his mind to run, but this is his third term. He seems to get along pretty well with the people.

When we got the Civil Rights Bill through and the Consent Decree signed, there were two or three black-owned gambling houses over here that had to go broke. Reno was the same way. Some people still gambled on the Westside because it was cheap—you could only bet so much. I think about fifty dollars was the top that they'd allow you to bet. But

downtown you'd go in and bet five hundred if you wanted to. So naturally, people were going to go where they could win—to the Strip or downtown. After that, a lot of blacks weren't satisfied. They said, "Well, you should have left it like it was."

I'd say, "Well, you're trying to tell me that maybe we fought the Civil War for nothing; they should have kept blacks as slaves." I'd kind of laugh it off and go ahead, but I made a lot of them think a little bit. I guess everybody's fairly happy right now.

I think the NAACP has been real vital to blacks all over the world! I think it's the greatest organization that ever *was* for race relations in this country. I've been a member of it ever since I was nineteen years old. The real founders of the NAACP came from a Jewish organization in New York, and they furnished the money and everything else to get it going. With the Scottsboro Boys case, I heard one of the girls make a speech after these boys was out of prison. She talked about how they'd lied and how unfair it was, and she said they were young girls and they just didn't know any better. They said what people told them to say, and they just said it. So the NAACP has been doing things ever since. The NAACP was *definitely* the reason that Negroes got to work on Hoover Dam . . .

They're doing the biggest thing right now that's ever been done here in this town: they're looking into the Charles Bush killing. Some deputy sheriffs in Las Vegas went into his house on the Strip and killed him. (This was in March of this year, I think.) The police called it justifiable homicide. The cops just went and busted into his house. See, the thing about it: three police officers went in and he was naked, asleep. Earlier, they had made his girlfriend out and arrested her for prostitution. They took the key out of her purse and went into his

house and I guess he woke up struggling. They killed him! Choked him to death! Charles Bush had been living with a white girl, and they had been together for five or six years. He had worked on the Strip as a floor man at a kind of small-time hotel for eight years after working for the same company in Reno for five years. They said they suspected him of being a pimp, but they *couldn't* have suspected him of being a pimp, because he had one job that he'd been working on the floor right in the casino! The police officers were suspended, but then the police department turned them loose and were fixing to put them back to work. Reverend Jesse Scott got two or three of the members together and said, "No, I'm going all the way to the national with this. You're not going to put these people back to work." So they pulled them off, and they're off without pay now. So the NAACP has been trying to exert some political pressure on the sheriff. (You see, the sheriff is in charge of the police force here, because we have a metro police department.) That's what the NAACP is doing right now. We never had anything else like this where they resorted to anything like that.

I registered to vote when I was twenty-one years old. I was living in the Imperial Valley, and I registered as a Democrat because my uncles were Democrats. They sat down and explained that the Democratic party would always keep money in circulation, and that made it better for the poor people. (We're mostly speaking about blacks when we say "poor people," because it seems in those times, they didn't pay much attention to who was poor.)

Around 1928, a fellow named Henry Bogan and myself started a voters league in Las Vegas. We tried to connect it with the NAACP, but the NAACP doesn't endorse

political candidates. Finally, we formed the Nevada Voters League. I figured that if we had a voters league, we'd have monthly meetings from time to time. The black citizens in the party would become more sophisticated about politics if they talked things over with people on their own level. That's why we wanted it, and to get the vote out, too. But it was a failure, because we made it a Democratic voters league. We found there were only about four black Democrats in southern Nevada; all the rest of them were Republicans! We had a lot of black people who were registered Republican, I think just because Abraham Lincoln was a Republican president and signed the Emancipation Proclamation. I don't think they really went about to see which party would make it better for the working man. That's why our voters league was a mistake. We were just getting excited about Roosevelt then. The Roosevelt Democratic Club *was* black, but I was not a member.

In the 1960s I was president of the Nevada Voters League for two terms. The first time I ran was in 1960 against an attorney named Robert Reed. Then in 1962 I ran against a young fellow named Leonard Mason. (He was recently James McMillan's campaign manager.) So I served two terms. Every two years they would have an election and see if they wanted to reelect the president, if he was willing. Everybody wanted to run again when they had a chance.

Howard Cannon was one of the candidates we supported; Floyd Lamb was another one.²⁶ Mostly we'd ask the candidates if they could find room in their office, if there was a job that anybody could do, or would they be willing to hire a black helper or anything like that. We'd always put out a sample ballot with their names on it, and print campaign literature.

John and Al Cahlan were brothers who were newspapermen with the *Review-Journal*. They were Democrats, and they would sometimes help with the Voters League. Al and I had a run-in one time, so anything I say about him might be from a prejudicial standpoint. I don't remember exactly what we had the squabble about, to be very truthful, but I think it was a race issue, somehow. John and I got along—he was the younger brother. We got along very well, and he was very helpful. If we needed anything, he helped. Like sometimes we would need money for a voter headquarters, and he would always say, "Oh, hell, don't worry. We'll get you some money for that." I got along real well with John. Al and I never were *unfriendly*, but we never were friendly, either.

Overall, this community's mostly been pretty unified in all of its efforts for civil rights and political advancement. We never had a real community split about any candidates. As far as I know, about 60 percent of the black people on the Westside who can vote, do. But when I was president of the Voters League, we had *more* community spirit at that time than they got now. In fact, mostly we always got together and made it a community affair instead of a political organization. I think we need to have these old town hall meetings you hear people used to have—people from all walks of life would show up and talk. I think we need more of these. One thing I'd say is that we do have a public hall over there and I think we should have the meetings in a place like that—*not* in the church and not in the gambling house. We could even have it in a public park, if you want it in a public park . . . anyplace that don't belong to the church or the gambling houses.

There weren't really any different *factions* of blacks. I know once or twice we might have

had little misunderstandings. While I was president of the Voters League for two terms—four years—I had a little misunderstanding with some of the members of the NAACP. The black churches were getting involved with political candidates. But at first, the black ministers never would do anything more than talk to a candidate. (I can understand why a candidate would want the support, because the minister talked to more people a week than anybody else.) They would never bring the candidate to the church; they would never open the meeting and let the people ask them questions. Sometimes the preacher would just say, “Now, this is a good man. I know him.” So the candidates eventually found out it was a good idea to come and be asked a lot of questions by people. Of course, a lot of people used to believe in their ministers thirty or forty years ago What I had trouble with were the candidates who tried to sway the preachers through contributions to the church. One time a candidate spoke to me and he said, “I want you to come by the office; I want to talk to you.”

I said, “We’re going to have a meeting, and if you’ve got anything you want to say to me I’d like you to come and say it before the membership, because I don’t speak for them. I’m just the president of it and I’ll try to set up a meeting for everybody.” But this didn’t happen too often. Candidates knew that the only way they could get the Voters League to be behind them and endorse them was by answering to the membership. They’d have to be prepared to answer questions that some of the members were going to ask. But as far as the preachers were concerned, I’m sure there was money involved. I never did see the candidates giving the preachers money, but I had one to tell me about it. He said, “That preacher’s too tough for me. He wanted a thousand dollars before he’d let me come to

his church!” That preacher’s dead now, but I’d rather not mention his name.

We had a man that come out of a political family in the state of Nevada—Floyd Lamb—who was moving from Lincoln County down here in the mid-1960s. He talked to one of the preachers that he knew, and he gave the preacher some money, so I told him, “You can bunch your money up, because there’s nothing that preacher can do to help you. I’ll get up in the church and tell them that he took some money from you and sold his people out.” Later, Floyd Lamb got in one of those money-taking affairs here about seven, eight years ago, and they sent him to prison. Then Woodrow Wilson was sentenced to a prison term for taking a five thousand dollar bribe. (He founded the Westside Federal Credit Union, which has benefitted the community quite a bit. People who couldn’t get credit elsewhere have been able to buy homes and automobiles and things.) Woodrow Wilson was given probation on account of his wife was going blind, and he had to stay home and wait on her. After that, the black community didn’t feel the same. But we’ve been lucky enough to turn this type of thing around.

The Voters League has always let people know that they couldn’t buy votes. Many of us were vocal enough to let people know that the only way candidates could get the votes over here was to come to public meetings and be subjected to questions and things like that. If they didn’t answer to suit the voters, well, we wouldn’t endorse them. And we controlled, I guess, about two-thirds of the votes on this side of town, because they knew the man; they had a chance to talk to him and a chance to ask questions. (The NAACP and the Voters League is now kind of controlled by the same group. Reverend Scott is the president of the NAACP, and I think Marjorie Elliott might be the president of the Voters League now.

She's a real estate broker. Reverend Scott had also been president of the Voters League, but I don't think the members were really interested in having a preacher for their president.)

There are some other blacks who are politically active in Las Vegas: Dr. James McMillan, a dentist, ran for city council recently. But I haven't seen him since they dedicated a grade school to his name. The school is in the real western part of town. He ran against this young man, Frank Hawkins, for the same District 1 city council seat. I don't know why that came about—why two black men ended up competing for the same seat—but Hawkins won. Frank Hawkins is a young black fellow who was raised right up the street there, and he finished college up in Reno and went to pro football. He played pro football for the Raiders when they were in Oakland. Now he's in business here; he's got a little nightclub thing like that.

The Methodist Church, downtown on Second Street and Ogden, was the only black church back in the 1930s. We had a working minister; he worked in the railroad shops. His name was Reverend Armstrong. (When the church moved over to the Westside, I was up in Washington state.) It is now the Zion Methodist church. I don't know how it got in the white conference, but it still is. (The headquarters for that church, which is now pastored by Reverend Marion Bennett, is Redlands, California, in Riverside County.) Of all the rest of those black churches that came up here, I'm kind of interested in the Methodist Church because some of our family were Methodists. Then there's the Second Baptist—Reverend Davis is the pastor; the Sanctified Church was Bishop Cox's old church, but of course, Bishop Cox is dead now.

Reverend Simmons was a fellow who came here from down South. He came from

Tallulah, Louisiana. I didn't really meet him until later because I'd been away. (I had been over in Washington and California, and had rented out my home where I now live.) When I came back, there were some people living there who were related to David Hoggard. That's when I met Reverend Simmons. He had a church of his own—it was his church, his building. (I found that there were two or three preachers around who *owned* their churches. They hustled up the money and built churches of their own. Reverend Simmons was one of them.) He was very well thought of by some of the political candidates who ran. They liked him. Reverend Simmons seemed to have a little bit better viewpoint of having political candidates in the church than most of the ministers. Instead of mentioning the candidate on Sunday when they'd have most of the members there, he would tell the candidate, "If you tell me at what night, we'll have a meeting at our church so you can meet the people properly." I guess I liked him a little bit better than most of the ministers. I knew him quite well.

There has never been any friction between the churches and the gambling places because the churches get their biggest donations from the people that work in the gambling houses. And preachers like money! I belong to the Methodist church, and I always contributed to the building fund and everything.

The churches were a way for people to socialize. Aside from the churches, the only other social thing was the ladies' sorority—it's a nationally-known black sorority. They usually put on something for the community children, but otherwise the people kind of went by their churches.

(In Fresno County, where I was raised, it was a real melting pot, and I noticed they handled it well. They're now using sixth grade

centers over there, which means they have the races mixed together starting in sixth grade. It starts the kids out at the right age to get used to being mixed up with everybody.) In Las Vegas, before we got the sixth grade centers over on this side of town—they're now pretty popular—we had Madison and Kit Carson schools. See, some of the kids *never* went to school with whites, and no white kids over on the other side of town ever got mixed up with a lot of blacks. But when they started to bring them into these sixth grade centers, by the time they got through the sixth grade, they all got acquainted. They got to be friends with everybody else. I was raised up in a community where there was only two black boys: that was me and my brother. We just happened to live in a district where there were no other blacks. But I didn't have trouble getting acquainted with nobody, and I was used to going to school with whites. I was used to living with whites and didn't bother them, so we never had a race issue there. This race issue *starts* from little children, you know. I've seen it in both races: black and white. They say, "Oh, he's white," or "Oh, he's black." I think this country needs to forget about the black and white issue and just kind of figure who we are. I think we're working toward that right now. I heard a man make a real nice speech just a little while ago. He was talking about the veterans of Viet Nam. They treated them like they were nothing after they got back. But there have been celebrations since then given for the these veterans. Then he talked about the guys coming in from the Persian Gulf. The main thing he said was that blacks, brown and whites—all of them—were wounded and some of them died. The blood running in that sand over there all turned out red. He said he couldn't tell the difference in the blood. But I think the whole country will come to this idea, but not in my time. But it's getting a little better all the time.

BLACKS AND GAMING IN LAS VEGAS, 1930S-1980S

During the Hoover Dam days, Bill Jones, Clarence Reed and myself had what you might call *the* black gambling house. It was on Stewart Street, right across the street from where the old post office building was; A. B. Mitchell owned the building. The gambling house never really had a name—everybody just called it Clarence and Bill's gambling house. We called it Two Pals for a while; then, finally, when Bill Jones got our license for it, we named it Navasota, after his hometown in Texas. Bill was quite influential—ours was the first gaming license issued to blacks in Las Vegas.

We put up a meal every day for blacks coming in looking for work on the dam. There would be twenty-five or thirty people who were hungry. These people coming in had no place to eat, no place to sleep. They just slept on the floor in the gambling house. We didn't have a hotel or even a cafe connected with the gambling house—only gaming. We just had the kitchen facilities to cook for ourselves. People would do so many things for us to help out: The man who owned the grocery store

would furnish vegetables, meats, and stuff like that. The man who had a bakery shop would see to us getting all the day-old bread People would just come and eat free. All they had to do was help keep the place clean. We fed everybody who came through who was broke.

We had all the games that they allowed at that particular time. We had craps, Twenty-one—which they sometimes called blackjack—and poker, of course. Another game which we had on the license was solo, a popular pastime game kind of like bridge and whist. All of us who played games of that kind played solo; to pass the time away, we'd play three-handed. After we enlarged the building, a lot of them would come and drink, and, of course, we knew a lot of those people.

Mostly blacks came to my gambling house. We had some whites who would come, but not many regulars. We did have a few, because there were games that they played in the South that they couldn't play out here, except at our place. There was a game they called cotch, a French game; I knew the game

well. In this country they started out playing it around New Orleans. There were a lot of whites who played cotch, but they didn't have it in the early gaming places in Las Vegas, because when Nevada started licensing card games, they didn't include cotch, and they didn't have rules for it until I went to work for the Gaming Control Board. Back then, a lot of white guys would play cotch. They played it as a regular banking game: you had to bet with the house at all times. But the blacks played games where they bet against each other. You play with half of the deck, and there's what they call the big ends and the little ends. The little ends range from an ace to a six; then the other part, what they consider the big ends, is from a nine to a king, which you count a king six and the queen five. Cotch was played until sometime in the 1970s. People don't play cotch *at all* anymore; I don't ever see it.

Cooncan is a game that's still being played. Everybody plays it, especially the Southerners—the ones that they call the hustlers. The blacks and the whites all play it. Near as I can remember, they say it originated in France. I'm not too sure, but around New Orleans where the people considered themselves French or mixed with French . . . I know all of them play it. They play sometimes for big money—two or three hundred dollars a game. Cooncan would be like five-up, or something like that where you have to have a sequence of cards like three, four and five. That's before you can spread them, you know. Cooncan's along that same line, only you take nine cards and you got the four out of ten. But the suits all got to match; they got to be the king, queen and jack, or three, four and five of the same suit. A lot of whites were good cooncan players, and they'd come down and play in my place. That was a southern game, too.

Eventually all these games come out of the rule books, and I guess Hoyle is

still considered the top man in rules. All the gambling houses had both rule books: Richard K. Fox and Hoyle. I knew about Fox's rules from about 1918 to 1970, I guess.

At the clubs, inspectors supposedly came around to watch the games and make sure that the clubs or the customers weren't cheating. There was no set time, just random; they'd just pop in. They might come every day, or they may not come for a week. But we didn't worry about them at Two Pals because we didn't even know about them. In fact, I doubt if they *had* the inspections . . . they were just trying to keep people straight.

When Bill Jones and I opened Two Pals, we didn't get slots. There was some kind of a little something that we didn't qualify to get slots. But it wasn't a race issue; it was something else. You had to have a special license for slots, and we couldn't get one. But we had dice and card games and eventually the keno. We had small-stakes games. Now, like the Twenty-one games, there wasn't a whole lot of money. We had a ten-dollar limit unless some guy wanted to bet more. If we knew he had money, why, we'd raise the limit, something like that . . . You can do that; it's legal to raise the limit if you think he's got enough money. About the highest limit we had after we put banking games down was fifty dollars. No one ever won a lot from our club; it was just kind of a community place.

My partners and I usually worked the place ourselves. Now, sometimes we would train some younger men to work on the crap game for us, but the big poker games and cotch games—which we had a lot of in them days—one of us three was always there. We didn't really draw what you'd call a *salary*. What we did was we just paid all the bills and cut the profit three ways once a week, usually. That would come out to be two or

three hundred dollars apiece. We considered ourselves having a good week if we made three hundred apiece after all the expenses was paid. That wouldn't be bad right now! [laughter]

We had a safe where we kept our money, and it stayed open twenty-four hours a day. Women sometimes gambled there, but back when we had the gaming early, there were very few—didn't very many women gamble. But when I come back in 1947, we found that a lot of the black women were regular gaming customers, and they still are to this day. (And now a lot of them are dealers, and they go from one place to the other. We got some real good Twenty-one dealers of the black women!) Most of the women would rather play Twenty-one or something like that. The women don't care much for craps—it's loud and boisterous, you know.

We club owners never had any problems with the Las Vegas police. I remember Mark Withers, a black man; I knew him well. He was what you called an appointed constable, a process server. He wasn't elected by the popular vote of the people and didn't have any authority to arrest people. He didn't have any family when I came here. It was just him, and I never did hear him speak about a wife.

I remember the first black policeman that they had in Las Vegas was in 1931 when they were building the dam. I guess someone asked for a black policeman. It seemed as though he only worked in the black community down there. His name was Henry Blackno. (I can't remember how he spelled his name.) We didn't have a Westside to amount to anything then; Henry worked downtown Las Vegas. Supposedly, he could arrest anybody. I've heard people say that he didn't, but that's not true, because I had seen him arrest people. I saw him work Fremont Street from time to time.

The police protection on the Westside was all black. You'd hardly ever see any white police over here, unless he was a captain or a lieutenant or something. He'd just come to talk some business with somebody and go back. I've heard a lot of people say that the Negro police couldn't arrest anybody but Negroes, but that's not true, because a lot of them transferred from here to downtown. There was a man who retired from the police department with a number one badge. His name was Herman Moody, and he had been in the police department longer than anybody. He's still here. He and David Hoggard had been recruited by Joe Harris and Milton Welch. Mr. Hoggard was on the force from 1946 to 1949. (He later went to work for the school district.)

Club owners hired special officers to kind of keep down the fights. The guys would get to drinking, and it got to where it wasn't profitable for the owners to run and separate them. We were encouraged to hire special officers by the city police department and the sheriff's department. They said it was better for you to hire someone than for you to get involved in these family fights that they might have, so we started to hire them. I hired the first Negro who was ever hired for that purpose when I operated the gambling house in the old downtown. His name was Cortez. (I don't remember his first name; we never called him anything but Cortez.) He worked on First Street, directly across the street from the beginning of Block 16, down in there around the black gambling houses. We never had any trouble; we got along fine. Cortez was a fellow who could break up all the arguments. He came from McNary, Arizona. He had been some kind of a bouncer around the joints there. It was a common occurrence to have fights because people had scraps when they were half drunk. In those days men

and their wives who had their beefs would go out together and get drunk. Then you'd have trouble separating them! [laughter] So I thought security guards were a good solution to that.

There is an interesting story about how "Poison" Smith and some others came from Las Cruces, New Mexico. A lot of Negroes from Oklahoma had money, and they decided they were going to move to Mexico; they thought that was a good move. I'd say twenty-five to thirty families moved down to the Gulf Coast, close to Tampico. They opened up a settlement, cleared land, and they named a little town Tambargo. They got the land where it would support itself, and the Mexicans worked at it long enough to know how to raise cotton and corn and everything that the southern Negro had been raising. Then the Mexican government took the land from the blacks and gave them enough money to get back to El Paso, Texas. They couldn't go any further, so they settled up at Las Cruces, which had been a fertile valley fifty miles north of El Paso. Then the state of Texas bought *that* from the people, and they moved out. So a lot of the people moved out here—three carloads of them—and Poison Smith came with them!

Poison Smith was a young man who was a heavyweight prizefighter. He got to be a name prizefighter. His real name was Lewis Smith, but some manager had given him the nickname Poison because he was a real hard puncher. Everyone just called him Poison then. He lived here in Las Vegas all of his adult life. His brother was a security guard, mostly, but Poison was not much for it. He used to kind of work a little bit. Being an ex-prizefighter, he could touch those guys on the shoulder and . . . After his fighting days, Poison Smith worked for the city garbage

department. He worked for them a while, and then when they opened up the Test Site, he worked up there until he retired. He died about four or five years ago.

We were in there from 1931, and in 1935 I left the place with Clarence Reed and Bill Jones, and I went to Los Angeles. But I never gave up my holdings up here. I always called Las Vegas home. (In Los Angeles, I worked in a Chinese gambling house. We had what we called race-up gambling. That means that we got somebody watching for the police all the time. When they see them coming, why, we changed to legal games. [laughter]) I'd just come and go all the time. Eventually, I gave my portion of the club to Clarence Reed and Bill Jones. I told them to take my name off of the license because they were both much older than I was; I knew they were going to stay here; I was still drifting....

In 1936, I went up to Washington state and stayed less than a year before I came back to Las Vegas. They were building the Grand Coulee Dam, and I figured that we might be able to get some kind of gaming going up there, but the state of Washington just wouldn't legalize gambling. In the state of Washington at that time, you couldn't sell anything but beer and some of the table wines. You had certain hours; you had certain rules. You could only serve a customer if he was sitting down. If you were sitting down, and you and I were friends and I'd walk up, I couldn't stand behind you and have a drink. If I couldn't get a seat, I couldn't be served. But I figured—like all the hustlers did in those days—that there'd be somebody along the line who would take some money to let us have some gambling, but we never did get around to doing that. I was figuring on getting around the law, operating gambling behind closed doors, but we didn't do it. So I came on back to Las Vegas.

I worked several places other than Two Pals. I worked at the Exchange Club downtown in the 1930s and operated the card games for them. The Exchange Club no longer exists. It was owned by the McCarthy brothers, who were white. That's the first place that I worked. The Brown Derby had a clientele of its own. It was owned by a man from McNary, Arizona, and he just had his following: they were sawmill workers, see, who had come to work at Basic Magnesium. (The owner was P. L. Jefferson, and he's still around. He's retired, but he's still alive; he still lives here in Las Vegas.)

Around 1942, I went to work in a little club on Jackson Street that was run by Boysie Ensley; it was called the Ebony. I worked there for a while. He and his father and another fellow named Frank Wilson operated it. Boysie's club was originally located downtown, and I was away when Boysie moved his business from downtown on First Street. Boysie's business was just a cafe, but it also had a gaming license. He moved from that side of town over here—he already owned a lot of property on the Westside. His wife still owns it. I have been told it was his father's idea to move. He probably did it because most of the blacks were on the west side of town, so he might have thought, "We've got a black-owned business," and they moved over here. It has been suggested that Boysie may have been pressured to move his business out of downtown Las Vegas, but I cannot remember any time when anyone—any whites or any other blacks—tried to *encourage* people to get rid of their property downtown to come out here to the Westside.

I just moved from one club to another. I'd go wherever I'd get the best deal. I even worked up in Reno in a couple of places; one was called the New China Club. At all the clubs that I worked in, I had some say-so

about what happened, and this is what we used to do. You'd go in and put a bankroll down of your own, see—this was kind of popular among the guys. (And it was always easy for me, because I was pretty well known.) I'd put in as much as the house wanted to put in, like if the house said, "Well, you should have a thousand dollar bankroll on the table."

I said, "Well, I'll put five hundred and you put five," or we'd put a thousand dollars apiece and keep a thousand in the safe and keep a thousand on the game. Then I'd operate the game and split the profits. So I would be *in* with all of it, but I just wasn't on the license. This is how it was at six or seven of the places I worked. (There was no licensed gambling in California, but we worked the same rules as they had in Nevada.) I did this in Reno a little bit and quite a bit here in Las Vegas. That was quite a bit of money back then. That was very popular until Governor Grant Sawyer revised the gaming industry. He started getting people who would look out and check over the gambling. There was so much cheating going on, you understand.

I moved from one club to the other. Sometimes I would stay just as long as the business was good and we got along good. After we knew for sure they were going to stop letting you put in with these people, I stopped that. The state felt they weren't getting their proper share out of it, so they wanted everything to go through one ownership—there couldn't be any partners who weren't listed on the license.²⁷

I guess the most prosperous thing on the Westside at any one time was the Cotton Club, that was owned by three people. That was a real prosperous place. I guess it was probably the most publicized black gambling house in America, though it was built by Jews. The

three owners were James Calvert, Uvalde Caperton and Jody Cannon. The Cotton Club operated from about 1943 until the middle 1960s. It closed because they sold it, and the people that bought it just didn't make a go of it. (Then, of course, when they passed the Civil Rights Bill, blacks started gambling on the Strip because of the bigger bankrolls, and these little places over here just kind of died on the vine. There were bigger and better places to gamble, with higher payoffs.) I worked at the Cotton Club for a little while. They had a keno game, four or five Twenty-one tables, one dice table, and about three poker tables. So you're talking about four or five hundred people coming through the place at night.

There was another club that had a little funny name: the Chickadee. The Chinese people bought it; they called it the Louisiana Club. The Chickadee didn't last very long. It opened up and it stayed open for six or eight months, and it was kind of a failure. A Chinese fellow bought it out; his name was Zee Louie. The Chinese and the blacks patronized each others' clubs, and there was never any friction between any of these owners.

They had a mild form of gambling when I first come to Las Vegas in 1922. Then they opened up so you could have Twenty-one, but you couldn't have dice, and you couldn't have the lottery. And dice didn't come around until 1931, when the wide-open gambling started. Slot machines were in use from 1926 on. But the only thing that come *after* 1926 that we had trouble getting was a lottery. They were going to call it the Chinese lottery, and the state says that we can't have a lottery, but they figured up a way; along in about two or three years they decided to call it keno—racehorse keno, they first called it.

As far as the black gambling houses, their clientele was *mostly* black. Most of the games

they had was the same as all the rest of the clubs: they had poker, craps, and different card games—not just poker all the time. The black clubs didn't usually have roulette wheels. I think Oscar Crozier had it in the El Morocco one time, but I wasn't there at the time. He had a roulette wheel in there, but nobody ever played. It wasn't that it was too expensive, but black players don't *play* it much. That's why I guess black-owned gambling houses didn't ever fool with it. (I remember seeing roulette played mostly in Mexicali. When I was working in Mexicali and Tijuana, the ladies always sat around and played it while the men went and played other games, like blackjack and craps and stuff like that.)

About 1947, a black woman named Laura owned the land that the El Rio Club was built on. At the same time, a Chinaman who had a place on Jackson Street got sick or something and left town. (I think he went back to San Francisco.) He told another Chinaman named Bill Kees that it would be good if they could get a place on the Westside. But when he came down, he couldn't get a license from the city because he was Chinese. So Bill Kees went to Laura, who owned two or three pieces of property around town, and she built the building for him. (Her husband was kind of a building contractor, and she built a place on this land of hers. She's still alive and lives on the Westside; she's in her eighties now.) After it was built, she rented it to Bill Kees and eventually sold it to him, because Bill Kees finally got a license. Bill Kees was born and raised in Reno; he was a graduate from the University of Nevada at Reno. Bill Kees stayed in business for only about five years, because he died; I think he had a heart attack. After he died, the property was owned by Gene Chu, another Chinaman. He operated the gaming operation for about ten years—until

the early 1960s—when he moved back to San Francisco to take care of his mother, who was getting old. There was another Oriental named Bill Luke who was connected with Chinese gambling. He was a Hawaiian, but his wife was Chinese.

The Chinese often went into business together and they'd always run illegal gambling or something. They got money and big groups, you know.

Some Jewish people had gambling on the Westside. Jews built the Cotton Club, and they built another nightclub that was pretty good size; it's over there where Operation Life is now. Jewish people originally owned these clubs, but they eventually sold them to blacks.

One of the bigger clubs that had been opened by Jews was the Moulin Rouge.²⁸ They always referred to these people as Russian Jews. Fry was their name—a father and two sons. So they opened the bar, and Leo Fry was the one that was kind of the head of the bunch. The Moulin Rouge was supposed to be the thing that would connect the whites and blacks, you know, so they'd get used to being with one another. They got the hotel built, and then they wanted to use a big-time name. Joe Lewis was a big man in the fight game at that time, so they put him there as one of the owners. Two or three of the big owners from back in Detroit, New York and stuff—they were also supposed to have some things in there. But we never did have a black *business manager* there. All the bosses and all the decision makers—the Frys—were white. I wouldn't say that the hotel wasn't a success, because it stayed full of people all the time. But I think what went wrong with the Moulin Rouge Hotel was that all the money they took in, they carried someplace else; they didn't put it back into the hotel.

After the place had been open a while, we heard that Leo Fry was charging black

customers more for their drinks than white customers. So the NAACP had a black cop and a white cop go in from time to time and buy drinks and things. They ordered the same; they'd get close together, and they'd wind up ordering the same thing. But the white cop was paying seventy-five cents for his drink, and the black guy was paying a dollar and a half for his. So the NAACP—here we go again!—was going to take him to court. Before they went to court they had a meeting with Leo Fry and the city commissioners. (I guess one of the commissioners was chairing the meeting himself.) They asked Leo Fry if it was true that he had been charging blacks more than whites, and he said yes. He said, "We were trying to discourage the black people from coming. We wanted them to stop coming to the place, but it was in that community and we couldn't just turn them down." When they got through with that, they told him that he was going to have to close down. Fry asked the man who was chairing the meeting, "How much time will I have?"

The commissioner looked at his watch and said, "It's ten o'clock. I'll give you until twelve o'clock to get your stock out of there, because we're going to come and put a padlock on."

The commissioners said that as long as the Frys' name was on that place, they would never give a license to somebody, because the Frys had such a strong hold on it. So the Moulin Rouge had been setting that way for a long time. Nobody could ever make a success unless the Frys got their name off of the license.

The Moulin Rouge was just bought about 1985 by the Walker family: Sarann Walker and her three sons, James, Richard and Glen. (She's called Sarann Knight-Preddey; her first husband was a Walker.) Glen is a baccarat dealer at Caesar's Palace. (All of them are dealers, but Glen's the only one still working

out there.) So it remains to be seen if they will try to make the Moulin Rouge a big hotel like it was supposed to be when it was first built. It has been open from time to time—people leasing it—but they usually have had only one person running the hotel part and another one running the little gaming, the little bar and stuff like that. This is the first time anybody has had it where it'd be one solid operation. (The Walkers have another little place they call the People's Choice. I guess they've got gaming there, so I imagine what they'll do is transfer the gaming up to the big hotel.) But now they're getting ready to try it again, and it's probably going to take at least a million dollars to get the place looking first-class again. Sarann Knight-Preddey has had a long-term lease on it, but she isn't running a full-time hotel yet, and she did get gambling down there, though it looks very favorable right now for their gambling license.

At first, whites would come over to the Westside places a lot because we always had some type of entertainment in the black Elks Lodge. But they had to stop coming after they started having trouble. People were having a few fights and things. Then a lot of black guys got to where they'd steal from them; they'd steal the tires off their cars, and whites just kind of quit coming. A lot of black guys would say, "They won't let us in those clubs downtown. Why should we let them out here?"

I said, "Well, you've got a point, but they do furnish a lot of money." (I think one of the main things that might have started it was that Oscar Crozier owned a part of the El Morocco Club. His wife was white, and she had a couple of relatives who would come and work sometimes if it got busy. I worked there, too.) A lot of guys said, "We can't go downtown, so why let them work over here?" But later

when there weren't so many problems like this, anybody who came along could deal.

Of course, by the time BMI was established, Las Vegas was *completely* segregated, I guess you might say. The bulk of the Negroes who come here to work at Basic Magnesium were originally from Louisiana, Arkansas, and some came from a town in Arizona called McNary. They all came here to work. By that time there was already quite a number of Negroes living in the Westside. They just moved close to their friends and relatives . . . all of them moved to this side of town.²⁹ It made the economy better on this side of town, because all of them were working, and a couple of people opened stores and cafes.

We never really knew too much about the big-time gangsters until Bugsy Siegel came to town, and when he come here, he kind of let it be known that Bugsy Siegel was running the Flamingo. I never saw him but one time: I saw him the day before he got killed. I was going to Los Angeles to a fight, and the car he was in had a bullet-proof tonneau, the shield between the driver's compartment and the passenger compartment. The bellhop said to me, "You see that guy sitting in there?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "You know who that is?"

I said, "No, why should I know him?"

He said, "That's Bugsy Siegel." That's the only time I remember seeing him. He got killed the next day after the fight.³⁰

I worked for Grant Sawyer when he was running for governor in 1958. (This was when civil rights got heated up.) At that time, we had a Republican governor, Charlie Russell.³¹ He wasn't really all that interested in the gambling—gambling was here when he was elected, but he didn't go about doing anything. Some people say that Grant Sawyer was just

a “yes-man” to the black community. I don’t agree with that at all, but I can understand why a lot of people statewide would say that. The governor before him, Charles Russell, really had eight years where he didn’t care about no race of people *but* whites. He didn’t care for the Indian or the Mexican or the blacks or nobody else. And when Grant Sawyer got in there, he did. So maybe that’s why people talk about him that way.

Grant Sawyer had come before the Voters League and talked to all of us. I asked him about some of the things he thought would be better for gaming, and he told me. His ideas conformed with mine, so I told him that I would help him with all I could. I was well known in the state, so I went all over the state campaigning for him. The guy who I was working for at the time said, “Just take all the time off that you want.” When Grant was elected, we gave him 80 percent of the black votes down here, and he got about 60 percent up in Reno. So naturally, he was going to do something for the people that he knew for sure elected him. And he’s the kind of man that *would* do that. So he was a yes-man for the blacks—but he was the kind that followed through instead of just making promises: whatever blacks asked for, they got it. But they had to qualify to get it.

After he first got in office, Grant said, “Now, what do you want done about the black demands?”

I said, “The thing I want done is some jobs so some of the blacks get some of the good money that’s being spent.”

He started right to work on gaming. The first thing he did when he started to work was that he made some rules and bylaws for the state gaming board. In the early days of gambling, the tax man, who was just one man, was just going around collecting taxes, saying to the gamers, “You owe us this much.”

I never will forget they had a boy in there, a young man named Ray Germaine. And he’d just come and collect the taxes; he didn’t pay attention to what kind of games they had or anything. And when Sawyer was elected, it wasn’t more than three or four years before he got things regulated. This was one of the things that he got elected on: to bring gaming under control. So I think Sawyer is entitled to all the praises that anybody could give him. I think all the people in the gambling business should pay homage to him, because before then, gaming was operated just like you have a crap game at home, almost. I don’t think anybody really paid any attention to the gambling, because regulating it wasn’t a big thing until Sawyer.

I was hired as a gaming inspector under Grant Sawyer; he asked me to take that job. I think most of the reason I was hired for this job was because I had helped Grant in his election. (Grant had gotten ahold of Dr. West and told Dr. West to tell me to come to Carson City; he wanted to talk to me.³² So I went up to Carson, and he hired me.) The thing that I had to do more than anything else was travel all over the state and see if blacks were being allowed to gamble in all the places. I went to all the little towns up at Lake Tahoe. The little towns were hardly ever segregated, because they were too glad to have any kind of business. It was just the bigger towns. They would say, “I’m sorry. I can’t serve you; my boss doesn’t allow it.” But Reno was the worst of all of them, and Hawthorne really was a tough little town, too.

We answered directly to the Gaming Control Board, and the Gaming Control Board answered to the governor. The main part of my job was to see that the hotels and the regular casinos didn’t have known cheaters in charge of anything to do with gambling. That’s where the black book thing

came from.³³ That was Grant Sawyer's brainchild.

I had two or three different jobs with the Gaming Control Board. When I first went to work for them, I was a secret agent, you might say. I carried no identification other than an insurance card, so if anything happened, I wouldn't have a lot of trouble. I inspected the gaming establishments to see mainly if anyone was doing any cheating, or if they weren't allowing blacks or other races to gamble. People that worked for the house would be smart enough to keep outsiders from cheating them. So I would just go sit down and gamble.

The state used to give me money to go gambling with sometimes. In fact, if I was going up to Reno or something, I'd stop in Carson City, if I could, and go into the casinos to make sure blacks could gamble there. (Back then the black population in Carson City didn't amount to anything; it still doesn't.) It was kind of interesting to me, because if I wanted, I could keep the money I made; I just had to turn the bankroll back in. And so I was interested in that! [laughter] And if I lost the bankroll, it was OK. The job was not bad at all. I enjoyed working for the state. Then after two years or so, it'd become a known fact that I was an agent for the Gaming Control Board.

A few times I caught people cheating—individuals working for the casinos. They were cheating the patrons in the casino. (Most of this was in Clark County.) I'd have to report it to my boss, and he would send people in to check it out. Then the people who were cheating would probably lose their jobs. Sometimes I'd stop these types from cheating, but the house might end up losing a little money. It was always a situation where you could never report that the house had *told* them to cheat. And being a gambler of sorts, I could understand what was going on. You

wouldn't want to lose for the house, but you might have to cheat a little bit to stop the other guy from cheating. I guess anybody who is kind of sophisticated about gambling would do that. Sometimes the clubs got fined if we discovered they were cheating, and sometimes they got their license taken and everything else.

There was the Gaming Commission, and there was the Gaming Control Board—two different things. The Gaming Commission kind of sent out people to dig up a man's background to see if he was qualified to be on a license. The Control Board was in and out of the club to see that the games were operated properly according to the state rules on it.³⁴

I held that position six and a half years, until Grant Sawyer got beaten by Paul Laxalt in 1967. My job was just a political plum, you might as well say, but I could have gone back to work. And, of course, after it became known that I had been with the state for six and a half years, I could just almost ask for any kind of job I wanted.

After desegregation of the Strip, a guy from the Stardust Hotel sent for me. The owner called me up and had a meeting with me at my house. He just asked me if I would like to go to work on a floor job so I could talk to different people. The same day I was offered a job on Fremont Street. Then there was another fellow here named Van Santon, who was Canadian; he wanted me to come to work for him. Louis Wiener was an attorney; he also asked me if I wanted to go to work. His place was right next to the Golden Nugget, and the Golden Nugget finally bought him out, but Louis was in with so many places! Louis had known me ever since he was about thirteen or fourteen years old. His father was a tailor, and his father used to make my clothes. (Everybody who thought they were kind of

popular had their clothes made in those days. [laughter])

I went to the Stardust because I felt I would be exposed to more people. (The pay was also better on the Strip than it was downtown.) After I was there for two months, they filled their quota for minority hiring—their 10 percent. By then I was working the dice pit, going from table to table and just supervising one game, unless one of the bosses had to go. Then I would maybe work the floor and supervise two tables at a time. Then the Stardust offered me a thing to try to get all the black dealers that I could. (This was before they signed the Consent Decree.) They had one or two blacks, but they were people who just moved up from the kitchen help or something other. So I brought some people in—the ones who I knew could handle the action. There were a lot of good black dealers from the Westside who hadn't had a chance to deal on the Strip, but we had the same kind of action here. (The Moulin Rouge had had *exactly* the same action as the Strip, so that's where a lot of them spent a lot of time.)

Some of the blacks that I sent to the Stardust had gone to the dealers' school that Cubie Bush and I ran. Cubie had been teaching dealers for a long time. There was a black representative here from the Labor Department that the NAACP had brought in because the hotel-casinos were not hiring blacks as dealers. They were hiring blacks to do everything *but* deal: there were waiters and there were even black cocktail waitresses. So we talked with this black guy, and he told us how to go about getting funded for a dealing school from the government, and we did. (We were sponsored by government money because dealing in this state is a legitimate job.) We had to go through a voc-tech school ourselves before we could operate the school.

We had the dealers school in 1969 and 1970 in the E.O.B. building, and we were funded by the government.³⁵ Cubie Bush and I were the only ones allowed to operate a gambling school, and we had as many as thirty students at once. We taught craps and Twenty-one. The dealers were paid to go to school, and if it was a single guy, he got forty-five dollars a week for five days, because they had to come to school five days. If he had a family, he could get up as high as sixty dollars. If the student didn't show some initiative, we'd get him out. Among the people who worked at the school, Cubie and I were the ones who were known a little bit better than anybody else, so we took the dealers we trained to a hotel and would tell them, "This guy's ready; try him out." Some of them would be nervous and they'd look bad, but if they had one of us with them, then they would feel better. (There was quite an article in two or three newspapers about our school. They had a bunch of pictures of me in *Ebony* magazine, and I also saw an article in one of these scandal sheets. They had a picture of me and two or three more guys.) The government sponsored the school for another year after Cubie Bush and I quit. The fellow that operated it was Calvin Washington, who worked at the El Morocco. (He's still dealing somewhere out on the Strip.) He was teaching Twenty-one at the school. Then there was another fellow by the name of Calvin Lightford who helped him.

I stayed at the Stardust three years, then I got fired in 1974. There was a man at the Stardust named Frank "Lefty" Rosenthal, and he and I had a little misunderstanding: There was a man there who was \$85,000 losing, and I was supervising the game. When I got up, Rosenthal said, "Ray, the limit on this game is

\$500.” (That’s the biggest bet he could make at one time.) But the man was an \$85,000 loser, and they were letting him bet \$1,000.

I said, “Frank, he’s an \$85,000 loser on this game.” I said, “This is kind of a poor time to change the odds.”

He said, “I don’t give a damn if he was a million dollar loser. You understand that I’m the boss. If I tell you to announce that it’s \$500, you do it.”

I said, “I’ll be damned if I do it. You tell him. You’re the boss.” Of course, after the next couple of days, I got fired. [laughter]

When Lefty Rosenthal had taken over everything at the Stardust, he brought in a fellow named Allen Glick. They then got rid of all the people who knew anything about gambling—how much we’d made, how much cash was in the boxes. So they fired about fifty of us, but *not* just blacks. There were more whites fired than blacks. I think maybe I was the only black they fired. The rest of them were just dealers. They didn’t really know what was going on. They couldn’t stand by and look and remember some of the things that went on. Lefty Rosenthal said he didn’t want anyone working for him that knew more about the gambling business than he did! You know how the story goes about that: that was all gangster money, and Rosenthal was brought out here for the purpose of getting rid of the people that the mob didn’t want. By that time we had a civil rights bill and you had to have a *reason* to fire a man. When he fired me, I wouldn’t sign the termination slip, and so they said, “Well, we’ll hold your check up until you do”

I said, “No, you won’t hold my check up. You’ll give me my check on payday and until you have something on the termination slip that sounds reasonable to me, I won’t sign.” So when I went back, why, they had a termination slip and it says, “Change in personnel.” And

where it says, “This man eligible for rehire?” it said, “Yes.” *Then* I signed. After I got fired, I didn’t do anything for about a year. I had been working pretty hard, so my wife and I took a couple of trips and came back, and then I decided I wanted to go to work again. Then Sid Wyman from the Dunes sent for me. When I went to the Dunes, Schenker was the chairman of the board. I went up there and stayed eight and a half years, from 1974 to 1983. I stayed until I got where I couldn’t see very well. I couldn’t do anything about my eyesight, so I haven’t tried to work since 1983. So that’s about the end of it, I guess. By then there was a much greater number of blacks working in the casinos. They had blacks dealing all the games, writing keno, and everything else—tending bar, cocktail waitress, food waitress.

I had a financial interest in some gambling establishments in Las Vegas. I had an interest in the Ebony with Boysie Ensley at one time. Then there were eight of us who owned the New Town Tavern, just eight or ten years ago. A black lady owned the Town Tavern, and she owed twenty-seven thousand dollars with no way to pay it. She was crying that her life’s work was in there and she couldn’t get anything out of it. (It was because of bad management.) She came to us, and seven of us got together and paid off her debt. That’s why it’s named the *New Town Tavern*. (Mostly I went in on this deal on account of Cubie Bush, who was a very good friend.) Our business name was Green and Associates. We had made Elijah Green the chairman of the board, but that was a big mistake because he wanted to make a family affair of it and hire all his relatives to run it. In fact, he still runs it now. Elijah Green and his father have the opportunity to have all the games, but Elijah’s not meeting his competition. He’s

not really in competition in the Strip, but he is in competition with North Las Vegas, like Jerry's Nugget and places like that. But he don't have all the games that people want, like keno. And he also has a small limit: ten dollars on Twenty-one. So it's his fault that he's not done better than what he's done. But Elijah and his father are satisfied with what they're doing. Finally, the partners all had a meeting, and I told them that I wasn't very satisfied because the job that I had was so profitable that I couldn't devote any time to this. I said it would be unfair for the rest of the owners, and I wondered if I could sell my share to Cubie Bush. They said yes, so I got out of it. I wasn't in the New Town Tavern very long, and that's the last place that I owned any interest in.

The gaming economy has benefitted the black community here. Quite a number of blacks have got good jobs in the gaming industry. The regular Twenty-one dealers and the guys working the crap game get paid low salaries, like forty dollars a day, but you also have the opportunity to make tips, you know. In the gaming industry they call it tokens. And that's why you see so many dealers that can't work in organized gambling, because they refuse to pay income tax and get into trouble.

You figure a dealer starts working at a place and earns from thirty to forty, forty-two dollars a day. By the time they cut the tokens at the end of the shift, he's made about a hundred dollars, because he's got fifty or sixty dollars that was given to him. Some of the sidewalk attorneys told him, "Gifts . . . you don't have to pay tax on it." So there's a lot of dealers that can't deal and won't have jobs, because they would owe forty or fifty thousand dollars in income tax. So you see new dealers all the time.

It's good for the community if they use it right, but a lot of them didn't use it right.

They'd buy cars, homes, they have on four or five thousand dollars' worth of jewelry, but they paid no income tax. They know forty dollars a day won't get you there.

I've seen some changes in gambling over time, like the honesty that the owners must put in. They usually would just cheat if they had a chance. Another thing is the pay has been much better. It gives you a chance to establish credit, because you're working on a salary someplace. When I first started to work, I was just working! It made no difference if you were making one hundred dollars a day or what, because you couldn't establish credit. They'd say, "Where do you work? Who do you work for?" Any time I put down anything, I'd say I was self-employed. But that's all I've ever done. Oh, yes! Working for a salary is *much* better. For about the last twenty years, I have worked on salaries, and I think it's much better than what I was doing before. I would still have been able to gamble, too, if I had wanted to. But I didn't, because if you've got to go to a job next morning at eight or ten o'clock, you can't gamble. Maybe the game might just be getting good in the middle of the night when it's time for you to go to bed, so I just quit it altogether. I was making a good salary gambling, but I was only gambling in the course of making a living. I finally figured I had gambled enough. I started before I was twenty, and gambled steady until I was past sixty-five.

In my time I was considered a top player. I've had a lot of people that couldn't understand how I just quit playing altogether, but I haven't gambled since I was in my sixties—and I'm ninety-one now. I don't know why I quit—I just don't know. I was playing in this cotch game, and we were getting guys because this was a big game. A guy there had a lot of money, and I got down and sat down

in the game and started playing, and I don't know There was no cheating or nothing going on in the game, and I won six or seven hundred dollars. He got up and quit, and I did, too, and I never sat down again. I never had no reason for quitting.

I have been active in this community for a long time, from 1928 until about six years ago. After I got good jobs out on the Strip after the Civil Rights Bill was passed, it took up too much time, so I did kind of pull away. But I never did stop helping them, you know. I worked with the Voters League up until 1980. And I'm in the membership of it right now. I've got a life membership. I'm also still a member of the NAACP.

There are improvements that these organizations could make. It's this thing that you always talk about: get some togetherness, meet up in your communities and discuss things—which they don't do. So they could be more active, and they could also be more congenial toward one another. Just because you got a different idea, it don't mean you got to fall out with a guy. It's hard for me to pass an opinion, but I think this holds back what the black community could do. I really think it does. I think they need to get together more and talk among themselves, because there's still a couple of factions now.

Blacks haven't done that well economically, because they could never get their businesses together. I think why it wasn't any better often was because they could never get together *themselves*! I guess they didn't want to form partnerships and things like that. So if I had to give any kind of advice to young black youth today, it would be like I said: togetherness. They should get together and discuss things among *themselves*. You see, maybe one thing is wrong with the community that *I* can see that *you* don't see, so you kind of trade ideas about

things. Maybe two of you can get together and bring the community together a little bit more.

I think we're pretty good about getting kids through school. I guess among the young people in this community we have about 60 percent of them that finishes high school. We don't have a high school on this side of town. You've heard of de facto segregation?—you live in a community, you go to school there, and all that. The black churches have been beefing: Every so often I hear some of the guys complain, "We don't have a high school!" But right now they're building a big high school right where what is considered the black and white parts of town meet, so all races will be going to school together. I'm all *against* a high school in this community. I've stated that fact a lot of times to the preachers and the teachers, too. And that is because I think a high school in this community would take us right back to that de facto segregation: you live on the Westside, you go to school on the Westside.

I'm not too active anymore. Of course, I always thought it was hard to ask other people to do something for me. I'd ask someone to do something a time or two, but I don't bother no more with them. I can't see good enough to drive, and the main things that I go to a lot of times is I go to the university to hear speakers and such things; I like to get out around town. I go maybe with Reverend Scott, and sometimes my adopted son takes me. (His name is Dr. Lonnie Sison, and he's an optometrist. His business is on Maryland Parkway, and his wife works for the state employment service.) My other son is Charles Jones. My present wife is Juanita Ray.

I think I'm pretty well content with my life because I've done mostly what I wanted

to do. I guess it would have been much nicer had I gone to school a little longer. I guess I missed some opportunities that I would have like to participate in if I had had a little more education . . . I think I would have enjoyed growing up and being a lawyer. It's only my own fault that I wasn't.

I imagine the life of a gambler is considered to be kind of romantic, and there's a certain vision of what a gambler's like. I imagine that might have been part of the reason that I liked gambling, but I'm not too sure. It was a way of life with me, you know—I just started out young, and this uncle of mine, he didn't make it any better for me . . . I've had money, and I don't have any now, but I found that all the money I got rid of was my own fault. Didn't nobody take it from me.

NOTES

1. Five Civilized Tribes was a name used for the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole tribes. They settled Indian Territory after the Removal Act of 1830 forced them from their tribal homelands in the American Southeast.

2. Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) promoted ideas of self-help among blacks; Tuskegee Institute emphasized industrial training. Frederick Douglass (1817-1895) advocated abolition through political activism.

3. The National Railroad Strike of 1922 involved three major railroads: the Union Pacific, Southern Pacific, and Western Pacific. The Railroad Labor Board, which had in 1920 granted a 20 percent wage increase to railroad workers, reduced wages by 12 percent in 1921-1922, following Warren Harding's arrival in office. This culminated in a popularly-supported massive walkout, which lasted about four months. Independent agreements were reached between management and labor, resulting in the demise of the Railroad Labor

Board and the creation of the Railway Labor Act in 1926.

4. John L. Lewis became president of the United Mine Workers of America in 1920. In 1935, he formed the Committee for Industrial Organization within the American Federation of Labor. In 1938, the AFL expelled the Committee for Industrial Organization, which then changed its name to the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

5. On June 25, 1929, the Boulder Canyon Project Act was signed by President Herbert Hoover, authorizing \$165 million for construction costs. This followed more than eight years of site testing in Boulder and Black Canyons. When the construction schedule was announced in 1930, hundreds of workers and their families arrived, hoping to secure employment on the dam.

6. Eldorado Canyon is about twenty-nine miles southeast of Boulder City. Searchlight is about fifty miles south of Las Vegas.

7. Laws dealing with miscegenation date back to earliest colonial times. Forty states, including Nevada, had such laws on their statute books, forbidding marriage, cohabitation, and sexual liaisons between blacks and whites. Nevada's law was revoked in March, 1959.

8. It was rumored that Mayor Ernie Cragin threatened not to renew licenses to black gaming and retail establishments if they refused to relocate to the Westside. This is disputed.

9. The townsite Mr. Ray refers to here is not the Clark Townsite, but one set up by surveyor J. T. McWilliams, who bought and sold land on what became the west side of the tracks.

10. The black Las Vegas population soared between 1942 and 1944, thanks to the construction of Basic Magnesium, Inc., a major defense installation built near what later became Henderson, Nevada. Production started in 1941, and the plant operated until the fall of 1944. Prior to World War II, the black population in all of Clark County did not exceed 180 individuals; three years later the black population on the Westside numbered over three thousand.

11. There was a black team called the Las Vegas Colored Giants.

12. The federal government's contract with Six Companies, Inc., stipulated that "American citizens" be hired; "mongolians" were the only group blatantly excluded from hiring. However, since it was widely believed that "American citizen" meant "white American citizen", Six Companies was effectively able to put this hiring practice into

effect. The first ten blacks were hired on July 7, 1932, and another fourteen were hired in September. A total of forty-four worked on the dam during construction.

13. The Scottsboro case (1931) involved nine black youths in Alabama who were accused of raping two white women in a freight car. They were found guilty and sentenced to death or to seventy-five to ninety-nine years in prison. The U.S. Supreme Court reversed the convictions twice. At the second trial, one of the women recanted.

14. Herman M. "Hank" Greenspun was the publisher of the *Las Vegas Sun*, the rival of the *Review-Journal*.

15. By 1936, while only forty-four blacks had been hired to work on the dam—a few several times—over twenty thousand different whites had been employed.

16. Six Companies, Inc., was comprised of the following companies: Utah, Morrison-Knudsen, J. F. Shea, Pacific Bridge, MacDonald & Kahn, and Bechtel-Kaiser-Warren Brothers.

17. What Mr. Ray may be referring to is a long-standing rumor that several workers' bodies were left encased in cement where they fell. In fact, the only man to be encased in cement was entombed for sixteen hours, until searchers located his body. (The deaths of over twenty men are described in *Hoover Dam: An American Adventure* [Joseph E. Stevens, 1988].)

18. Railroad Pass was located two miles west of Boulder City.

19. Jim Cashman, Sr., owned an automobile dealership and was a leading citizen in the

community until his death. Jim Cashman, Jr., still resides in Las Vegas.

20. Black Las Vegas citizens planned to march on the Strip unless discriminatory practices in the casinos were halted by March 26, 1960. The conflict was finally settled by the landmark Moulin Rouge agreement, in which casino owners agreed to admit black patrons and cease segregation. The Southern Nevada Human Relations Committee was formed as a part of the agreement.

21. Bob Bailey was chairman of the Nevada Equal Rights Commission, which was established by Governor Grant Sawyer in 1962.

22. A state civil rights bill was passed in 1964 and outlawed discrimination in public accommodation and employment in places with fifteen or more employees.

23. On June 4, 1971, the Las Vegas hotels and unions signed a Consent Decree pledging to end discrimination in hiring. This came as a result of a suit filed by the NAACP. Charles Kellar, an attorney and president of the NAACP, drew up the Consent Decree as a way to encourage compliance with the 1964 Civil Rights Bill.

24. The incident at the Golden West Shopping Center was one of many that occurred in 1969-1970 in which blacks expressed their dissatisfaction over school segregation, job discrimination and closed housing. Several riots forced temporary school closures around the city. By 1972, open housing, school integration and other measures were passed in the state legislature, and hotel-casino operators in Las Vegas signed the Consent Decree, which enabled blacks to

have the same employment opportunities as whites.

25. In 1970, the Nevada Resort Association offered a plan to promote hiring blacks in nonmenial positions, including enrolling blacks as hotel supervisors in the "Minority Employment" workshops of the University of Nevada, policing hotel-casino hiring practices, and making an outright gift of seventy-five thousand dollars to the Las Vegas NAACP to stimulate motivation for training among minorities.

26. Howard Cannon (Democrat) served four terms as a U.S. Senator from Nevada, from 1959 to 1983. Floyd Lamb (Democrat) served fifteen terms in the Nevada State Senate, from 1957 to 1985.

27. In the 1960s under the Sawyer administration, gambling regulation underwent total revision. Only individuals who were specifically licensed by the state could operate a gambling establishment.

28. The Moulin Rouge was built in 1955 by Max Schwartz, Louis Ruben and Alex Bismo. The establishment went into bankruptcy within seven months. Leo Fry, owner of the LeRoy Corporation, acquired the property in 1957.

29. A small number of blacks resided at Carver Park, a black housing project near the BMI site.

30. Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel was first dispatched to Las Vegas in the 1930s by the Capone-Luciano syndicate to supervise its west coast operations. With the support of the syndicate, in 1946 he opened the Flamingo Hotel, and is credited with transforming Las

Vegas into a resort city. He was assassinated in 1947.

31. Charles H. Russell (Republican) served two consecutive terms as Nevada's governor, from 1951-1958.

32. Dr. Charles West was the first black physician in Las Vegas; he was active in civil rights efforts in the area.

33. The black book lists people banned from gaming establishments.

34. The five-member State Gaming Commission was created by Governor Grant Sawyer in 1959. The commission is responsible for creating all policy on gaming laws and rules. The three-member Gaming Control Board, created in 1955, is the investigative and enforcement arm, and makes recommendations to the gaming commission on licenses granted and revoked.

35. E.O.B. is the Equal Opportunity Board, and it offers a wide range of services to minority groups.

PHOTOGRAPHS



A 1957 meeting of black Las Vegas leaders. Left to right: Charles Kellar, Woodrow Wilson, Clarence Ray, Jim Anderson and Reverend Davis.



Calvin Washington (far left) runs the crap game at the El Morocco on the Las Vegas Westside, the final night before its 1954 closing; standing next to him is Cleo Johns. Clarence Ray, night manger of the club, is not pictured. The El Morocco was rebuilt by Oscar Crozier shortly after its closing, and he operated the club until about 1964.

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